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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1970
VOL. 28, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEATH HAS TWO FACES

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Under a gangland death sentence and with time running out fast, Mike Shayne sought the one clue that might save him, the riddle of the mild little man who was everyone's friend by day—and turned into a ravening killer when the night shadows came.

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LEO MARGULIES
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CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

HOLMES TAYLOR
Associate Editor

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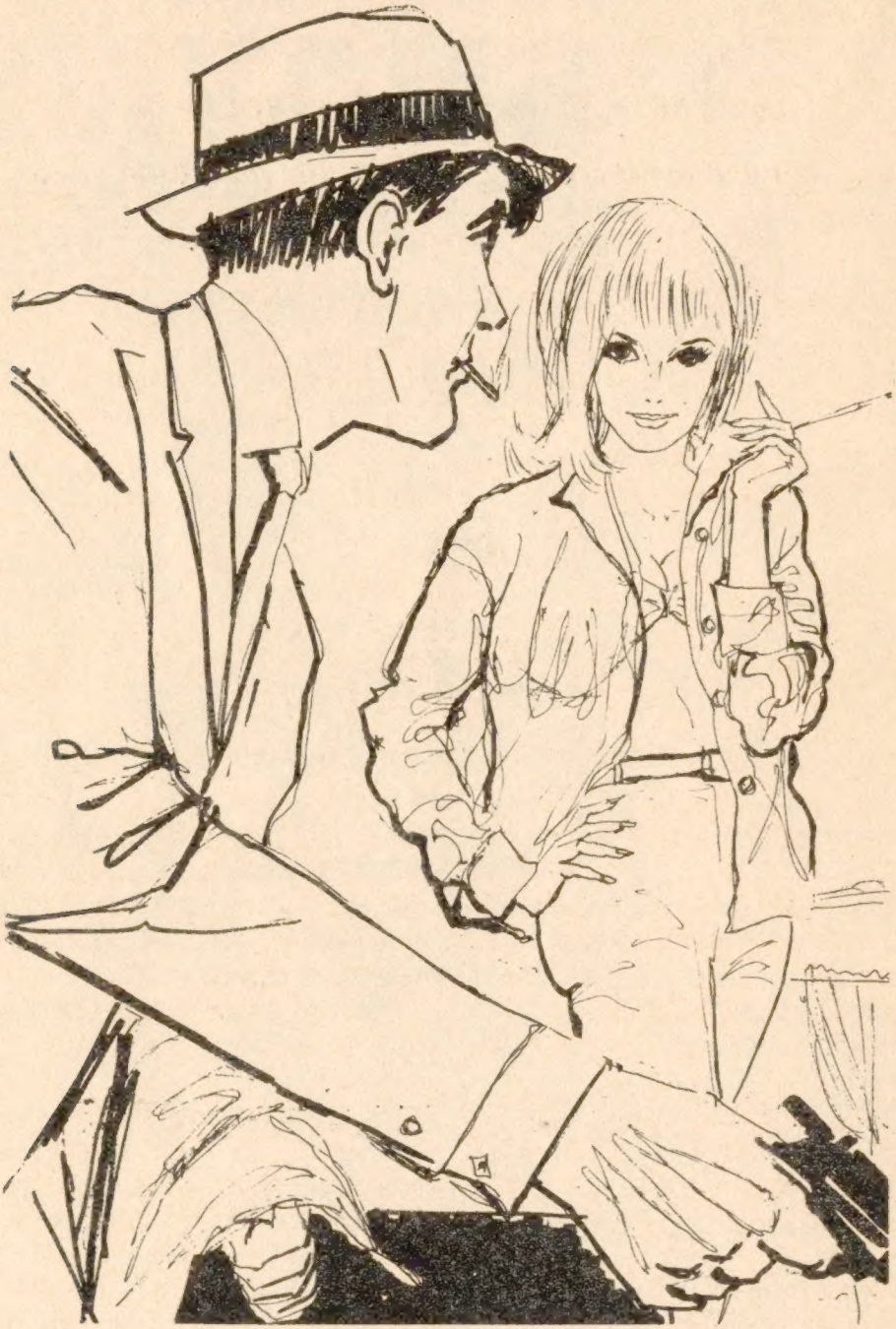
A New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel



Death Has Two Faces

Healer by day, ruthless killer by night . . . could Mike Shayne, himself marked to die, solve the incredible riddle of the mild little man whose pleasure was murder by night?

By BRETT HALLIDAY

THE OLD MAN lived in an old house on an old street in the aging part of northwest Miami. He sat down in an old fashioned rocking chair on the old-fashioned front porch of his frame home and watched the children play in the street. Nailed to the big oak tree in the front yard was a discreetly lettered wooden sign. He'd painted it himself years back.

The sign said: *Dr. John Smith—by Appointment Only.*

After a bit the hot summer afternoon made him drowsy. Across the street a radio was blasting rock and roll, but even that sound affected him mostly as a soporific, possibly because he was almost fifty per cent deaf already.

The old man nodded, settled back more comfortably and quietly closed his aged eyes.

He never opened them again.

Nobody in the neighborhood heard anything. Nobody saw anything out of the ordinary. He didn't fall out of the rocker when he died. He just slumped back a little further and continued to sit there

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through the long somnolent afternoon and the quick, tropic dusk and the long, hot, thunder-rumbling night. In the morning he was still there.

The postman came up the walk about nine in the morning. He thought at first how peacefully old Doc Smith was snoozing there in the chair. Then he looked again and saw where blood had trickled —just a few drops—from the neat round hole just over Doc's left eye.

He ran into the house then and picked the phone out of its cradle.

* * *

AT PRECISELY nine-ten A.M. Dolly poured coffee laced with whiskey into the fine Sevres porcelain cup on her breakfast tray, took a long swallow and felt it begin to warm her stomach.

"You're sure?" she asked the maid who had brought the tray.

"Oh yes, Miss Dolly," the colored woman said. "He ain't been home all night. Bed ain't slept in. Towels in the bathroom never even unfolded. I am sure."

"Well, who cares?" Dolly said and tossed her mop of overly-golden shoulder length hair.

Even at forty Dolly was proud of the thick coils of hair on her plump white shoulders. She was proud of her soft, small hands and feet and of what a bra did for full ripe-to bursting breasts and of her two big closets full of expensive clothes. She was proud of the huge, overfurnished pseudo-Moorish palace fronting on Miami Beach's Indian Creek where she lived.

"Who cares?" she repeated. "Sometimes I wonder why he ever comes home at all. It isn't one night in six he sleeps here, but as long as he pays the bills I'm not about to fuss him over it."

She took the silver cover off the plate of ham and eggs and picked up knife and fork. The whiskey-and had settled her down to a point where appetite could emerge.

Maria said: "Yes, ma'm. Ain't that rightly so, Miss Dolly."

* * *

IT WAS ONLY nine-fifteen, and Michael Shayne sat behind the big mahogany desk in his Flagler Street office and tried to digest a heavy breakfast and listen to an excited client without letting either occupation interfere with the other. It wasn't easy.

At her own desk a few feet away Lucy Hamilton took down every word that was said in her shorthand notebook. Just in case her boss's memory might need a later jogging.

The client was big with a hard, blue-jowled face and hands that an expensive manicure hadn't improved from their original square toughness. He was black-eyed and Italian and his custom-tailored sports jacket had cost four hun-

dred and fifty dollars, not allowing for the bronze Roman coins used for buttons. He wore alligator shoes which had had to be specially made in size twelve and one half. He was a man obviously accustomed to his own way in most affairs.

At the moment he was in a towering rage. His eyes positively sparked ferocity.

"Look at it!" he yelled at the big private detective. "Look! Look, I say. How could anyone dare?"

"It" was a bracelet which he waved, brandished, and then threw down on the desk blotter in front of Mike Shayne. The links were sculptored and intertwined platinum and heavy red gold and meant to make two loops around a womans' arm. The stones were emerald and sapphire from the Ural mines, big and with an old fashioned cut, which meant they'd been first worn by a Grand Duchess who was cousin to the Czar.

Lucy Hamilton gasped when she saw it.

"Why," she said, "that's beautiful. Beautiful and barbaric. It must be worth a fortune. Where did you get it?"

"Out of my wife's jewel cabinet in my library wall safe." The man was answering Lucy, but his words were addressed to the redhead. "Two days back I took it out of the safe for her to wear at my cousin's wedding next Saturday. I wanted to have it cleaned. Cleaned!"

"It looks clean to me," Shayne said. "I agree with Miss Hamilton that it's a beautiful piece of jewelry and must be worth a fortune. Of course I'm no jeweler. You want me to guard this while it's being worn at the wedding."

"I wish that was it," the client said. "Lord, how I wish that was it."

"Well then?"

"You're right, you're no jeweler," he said. "The man who sold me this thing was. He swore it was worth every cent of the price of eighty-five-thousand dollars. I didn't take his word for it either. I had appraisals made by two other jewelers and by the company that insures all these things for me. They all backed him up."

"You can rest assured that's the value then," Shayne said.

"Value, hell, Shayne. That was the value of the bracelet I bought all right. But that thing in your hand! It's worth maybe a couple of hundred bucks at the most. That's all."

"What do you mean, Mr. Carlucci?" Lucy asked.

"He must mean somebody pulled a switch," Shayne told her. "You want me to find out who?"

"You bet somebody pulled a switch," Carlucci said. "I thought it was funny when I got this thing out of the safe and it didn't need cleaning. The bracelet I remembered did need it. Then I looked closer and it didn't look just right.

I couldn't be sure why, but it wasn't right. So I took it back to the man I bought it from. That's Abe Steiner over on Lincoln Road. You probably know him?"

"Sure I know him," Shayne said. "Everybody knows Abe. He'd never pull a switch on you, mister."

"That's what I think too. I check out a dealer plenty before I buy anything more than a cigarette lighter from his place. So when Abe looks at the thing he lets out a squawk and puts his glass in his eye. Then he hollers some more."

"No good?" Shayne asked.

"Phony. Phony as anything. A real wooden nutmeg. Even the platinum and gold are something else. It's a good copy, but just a copy. That's all. Good enough to fool me, if it hadn't been cleaner than I expected, but any jeweler would know it with his naked eye."

"What does Mrs. Carlucci have to say about it?" Shayne asked. "Had she left it any place for repair or something? Lost it for a little while and not told you?"

"No," Carlucci said. "She swears not. And the hell of it is I believe her. Not that Alida wouldn't lie her head right off that beautiful neck of hers if she thought it'd help. She would. She has. But I don't think so this time. It would have been hard to do anyway. The stones — all her really good stuff — stay in a bank vault or in that wall safe, and I'm the only one has the combination to that safe.

"I know every time she's worn this thing and where she went and how long it was out. I was with her most of the time whenever she wore it anyway."

"There's got to have been a time and place for a switch to be made," Shayne said. "Sooner or later I'll find it for you and be able to tell who did it. You want me to have him arrested of course?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself, shamus," his client said grimly. "You prove to me who pulled that switch. That's all I'm hiring you to do. You know who I am, don't you? You know who Big Sam Carlucci is?"

Mike Shayne knew. Big Sam was head of a shadowy underworld "Family" which controlled much of Florida's gambling and prostitution rackets. He had the reputation of a very hard character indeed. Shayne didn't envy whoever had switched the stones to rob this man.

"Some punk thought he could take me and make it stick," Sam Carlucci said. "I don't need no law to handle that. I take care of my own problems, but that's none of your business. You're hired to find out who's got my eighty-five grand worth of ice and get it back if you can. If you can't, I ain't worried anyhow. After I reason with the guy he'll be in a hurry to give it back to me himself."

"First," Shayne said, "there's a whole lot of questions I'm going to have to get answers for. Detective

work is mostly questions. So try and remember everything you can."

ABOUT TEN-TWENTY AM an unmarked hardtop pulled up in front of the old frame house on the northwest side. The big man who got out was wearing a brown Palm Beach suit and a hand woven Panama hat. His name was Bill Ryan, and he was captain of the homicide division of Chief Will Gentry's Miami police force.

The uniformed men and detectives already in the house were suitably impressed. It wasn't usual for the captain to put in a personal appearance on a minor killing like this one had at first appeared to be.

The body of Doctor Smith had been photographed and examined and now rested under a sheet on a police ambulance stretcher next to the rocking chair in which he'd died. The captain ignored its presence and went right into the house to where Sergeant Milliken, the detective in charge, was waiting.

"Well John," he said, "how come you felt I should come out here?"

"I'll show you," Milliken said. "There's something phony about this one. First take a look at this here."

"This here" was a highly sophisticated and very expensive model wall safe the police had found behind an ancient steel engraving of a sleigh full of frightened Russians being chased by wolves. A specialist employed by Homicide was

working at it, but so far he hadn't managed to get it open. It was a tribute to the quality of the safe.

"Not exactly the sort of toy an old neighborhood doctor usually plays with," Ryan said of the safe. "What else?"

"In here," Milliken said and led the way to the back bedroom.

The room had been fitted with a porcelain topped operating table, a sink, and a steamer for the sterilization of operating instruments. There was also a glass cabinet holding neatly wracked instruments of Doc Smith's trade.

"The coroner's boys," Milliken said, "they tell me most of them things is for fixing up a woman got herself that way and don't want to have the baby."

"All right," Ryan said, "so old Doc Smith was an abortionist at

least part of the time. What's to get excited about? This town is full of them and you know it as well as I do. Can't you handle this by yourself?"

"The town," the sergeant informed him, "sure ain't full of what I'm going to show you next. Come on."

The next door down the hall leading to the front of the house was a bathroom. On the wall dividing this room the improvised operating room was what looked like an ordinary white wooden medicine cabinet, a fixture sold in any department store.

"I wondered why all the shaving stuff and nose drops was on the window sill or the top of the toilet," Milliken explained. "Look here."

He opened the cabinet door dramatically. Inside an expensive German camera with an automatic timer to snap pictures was mounted so the lense pointed through a small hole in the wall. There was a one way mirror and glass on the wall of the operating room. The camera was focussed so it would take detailed shots of whatever was done on the table.

"Very neat," Ryan agreed. "Doc wasn't just an abortionist then. He must have gone in for a touch of blackmail here and there too. Again why can't you handle it without me?"

"You ain't seen a thing yet," Milliken said. He pointed to the floor where there lay the two halves of an old fashioned china shaving mug. "Hogan knocked it off the window sill. It broke like you see. You know how clumsy that dumb ape is."

"Well?"

Milliken leaned down and picked up the broken half that still held part of a used cake of shaving soap. He pried this up with his thumb and held out the china fragment to his boss. There, where they'd been hidden under the soap, were two beautiful star rubies and three emeralds. The smallest of the five stones must have weighed at least three or three and a half carats.

"Look at them rocks," Milliken said, "and then ask me if it's still a penny-ante case."

II

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE finished questioning Sam Carlucci and saw the man off from his office, he went into the back room of the office suite. He'd had this small room fitted with an apartment sized gas stove and an electric refrigerator. There were also all the fittings for a small portable bar. He poured three fingers of good brandy into an ordinary glass tumbler, filled another with cold water from the refrigerator, and carried both glasses back to his desk.

Lucy Hamilton had been looking through the pages of notes she'd just finished taking. She wait-

ed while Shayne drank some of the brandy and chased it with a swallow of water. Then he put his feet up on the desk and leaned back in the oversize swivel chair till his head was braced against the wall.

"What do you make of his story, Angel?" he asked her then.

"I can't be sure of course, Michael," Lucy told him. "This is just the start of a case. Still and all, I think Mr. Carlucci's probably wrong about one thing. It's a hundred to one his wife will know more about what happened than he thinks she does."

"Carlucci's hot blooded, jealous," Shayne said. "I wouldn't want to repeat to Carlucci what you just said. Not unless I had pretty solid proof it was true I wouldn't. So what makes you think so?"

"The same things that make you think so, dear," Lucy said and laughed at him. "Mr. Carlucci always locked the bracelet up in that safe of his when she wasn't actually wearing it. That means the switch had to be made when it was in her possession. Granted, that is, that he's right about nobody else having the combination to open that safe. If that's so nobody could get at the jewels unless she was wearing them."

"Your guess about the safe probably is true," Shayne agreed. "Whoever built it and installed one for a guy like Carlucci would make darned good and sure the combination wasn't left lying around loose. If it got into the wrong hands because of his being careless, Big Sam would hold him personally responsible. That would certainly be painful, maybe even fatal. So he'd probably let Carlucci set the original combination himself. That way the locksmith wouldn't even know it himself. That's what I think I'd do in his place."

"So it goes back to what I said," Lucy said. "It had to be done somehow while she had the bracelet out. We've got notes here on every time he remembered her wearing it. It was always in public places and with lots of people around. Do you think anybody could switch it right on her wrist without her knowing?"

"I've known pickpockets who'd claim they could, Angel," Shayne said, "but I don't really think it could be done. They just like to boast. In a crowd a really top Fingers might steal it without her feeling him or anyone seeing anything. Putting a fake back on too would be a horse of another color.

"It would take a lot more time for one thing, and every second would increase the risk that somebody'd notice what he was doing. Then he'd have to have an exact duplicate of the bracelet made up in advance and have it in his pocket."

"Yes, Michael, and know when and where she was going to wear the original. That would be hard by itself. Mr. Carlucci said they

never decided exactly what jewelry she was going to wear on any evening until she was already dressing to go out. Sometimes he'd tell her to wear something she hadn't planned on. Other times she'd have to suggest some piece he hadn't thought of and send him to get it out of the safe."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "It would be hard to know in advance of her actually getting to a party. Still he could carry it around with him and just wait till he saw her wearing the bracelet. That would take patience, but not much more. Anyway there's one thing I may be able to check."

He leaned forward and took his office phone off its cradle and dialed the Steiner jewelry store on Lincoln Road in Miami Beach. By the time he'd been put through to the jeweler's private extension Lucy had her notebook out and was listening through the phone on her desk.

"Abe," the detective said, "this is Mike Shayne over on Flagler Street. Big Sam Carlucci's just been in here yelling about his wife's bracelet."

"A terrible thing," Steiner said. "I hope he doesn't think for a minute that I —"

"No," Shayne said, "he doesn't think you had a hand in any monkey business. You remember he had the stones appraised for insurance after he got them from you. He knows those were genuine ice. Besides you're an honest dealer. We all know it."

"Nice of you to say that," the jeweler said. "You know me, Mike, but you can never tell about a man like Carlucci. In his position he suspects everybody alive and he doesn't have to wait for proof before acting."

"I know that," Shayne said, "but if he doubted you I'd know it. He's hired me to try and find who heisted the stuff. Now there's something else maybe you could help with. Is there any way somebody could have made up an exact duplicate of that bracelet before he actually had it in his possession to study and examine?

"I think the switch had to be made in a public place, and that meant he had to put the phony on her at the same time he lifted the genuine article. There'd be no chance to make a duplicate direct from the original. You see what I mean?"

"I see all right," Steiner said, "and it could have been done. That bracelet was originally designed and made by Sam Behrens in Amsterdam. There'd be an exact description and a valuation of all stones along with his own design sketches in his records."

"I'll call him by overseas phone and ask if anybody else ever saw that stuff," Shayne said. "Thanks a lot."

"Hold on," Steiner said. "There's no phone to ring where Behrens is.

He's been dead for five years of a heart attack."

There was a moment of silence. Then Shayne said: "Who would get those records when he died?"

"I don't know, Steiner said. "Maybe his partners if he had any when he died. Or his heirs. You could probably find out from the authorities over there. That isn't the only way the piece could be duplicated, though."

"Oh swell," Shayne said. "What's another way?"

"Well," Steiner said, "you don't have to tell Big Sam, I hope, but this office keeps photos and descriptions of any really valuable item we sell. So does the insurance appraiser when his company underwrites any really high priced stuff. If that isn't bad enough a photo of this particular bracelet was published in International Jewelry Magazine soon after it was made."

"Fine," Shayne said. "Just fine. That thing's about as secret as a gas company road map of the State of Delaware. Well, thanks anyway, Abe. Call me if you think of anything that might be a help."

When he hung up the phone Shayne sat for a moment tugging at his ear lobe. Then he wrote several lines on a sheet of paper and passed it over to Lucy.

"Send this to whoever's in charge of the jewelry theft squad of the Amsterdam police," he said. "Tell him to cable me or phone, collect, and be sure all the charges go on my expense sheet for this particular caper."

Shayne's next call was to his old friend Tim Rourke, feature writer and long time reporter for the *Miami News.*

"What do you know about jewel robberies in the last couple of months?" Shayne asked. "Have any real experts been operating down this way that I haven't heard about? Particularly any new talent in the area?"

"It's funny you ask," Rourke said. "I've got a mess of clippings in front of me right now for doing research on exactly that subject."

"What got you started on it?" Shayne asked.

"It wasn't ESP," Rourke said. "Our regular man on the police beat phoned in a while ago. They were looking at a stiff up northwest this morning. An old doctor somebody'd shot in the head. No motive at first. Then they began turning up sparklers all over the place. Funny too. The old boy lived in a house so old Tugboat Annie wouldn't have it, but there's emeralds and rubies in his shaving mug."

"Do they think he stole them?"

"Well he didn't hatch them out of pigeon eggs. No, honestly Mike, your guess where they came from is as good as anybody else's as of right now. They say Ryan went out there himself a while ago and hasn't come back in yet. They also say there's a powerful safe in the wall. They haven't been able to crack it yet, but it'll likely tell them all sorts of things when they do. Where do you come in anyway? Is it mixed into a case of yours?"

"I don't think so," Shayne said. "I've been hired to find some missing rocks, but I don't see any connection with what you've just told me. Anyway there's been no doctor in the plot up to this point. So how's your research been going?"

"Lousy," Rourke said. "Nothing exciting shows. Even on the Beach the tourists have been leaving mostly cash and cameras in their rooms for the cat burglars. There hasn't been a total of five grand in stolen ice reported for months. That is unless the stuff you're looking for changes the picture. Does it?"

"I'm not sure just what it does do," Shayne evaded. "I just got this case an hour ago. Give me time."

"You wouldn't hold out on your old friend Uncle Tim? Sure you would, you bum. Come on, give with some details."

"I can't yet," Shayne said flatly. "I don't have enough to make a picture. I'll promise you though, if there's a story, you'll be the first to have it."

He hung up then before Tim Rourke could think of another and more potent argument. Lucy Hamilton had been holding the extension to her ear. She hung up to.

"I think you'd better look into all this, Michael," she said. "There's probably no connection, but there just possibly might be, and you wouldn't want to miss out on it."

Shayne put through a call to the *News* city desk and was given the address of the house where old Doc Smith had died.

"You're right." he told Lucy. "I'd better look into this killing. It's a hot day. Close the office and ride by there with me. Then I'll take you to lunch before we come back down town. They'll have moved the body to the morgue by now, so you won't have to look at it. You can even wait in the car if you like."

"Okay," she said. "I could use

a change of scene and a breath of fresh air."

III

MIKE SHAYNE found the address where the late Dr. Smith had kept his office easily enough. It was in an area of small frame or frame-stucco homes that had been low priced even when they were first built and of ancient, semi-crumbling concrete four and eight unit apartment buildings. There were big mango and avocado trees in fruit, gnarled and spike-thorned citrus and occasionally the unmistakable reek of a fruiting guava tree.

Small stores — groceries, candy stores, second-hand clothing, that type of enterprise — were invading the area. A few blocks away was a section that would shortly be integrated by the more pushing real estate salesman. The sidewalks were old and dilapidated and the streets had potholes deep enough to break a well worn tire driven over them at high speed.

"It hardly looks the place to keep jewels," Lucy said. "Not exactly the neighborhood you'd expect to find people who know the Carluccis either. This old doctor must have really been something unusual."

"Someday," Shayne said, "I'll tackle a case where everything turns out to be exactly what it seemed to be to begin with. When I do I think the shock will kill me."

When Shayne pulled up in front of old Doc's house the block was full of assorted police vehicles. "The boys are out in force," he told Lucy. "There's no police ambulance in sight though, so they must have taken the body for a coroner's autopsy. You like to come on in and look the place over?"

Mike Shayne enjoyed a privileged status with the city police due to his long and firm friendship with Chief Will Gentry. Ordinarily he could walk right on through police lines without challenge. Most of the men in the Homicide and Robbery squads were old friends who knew and liked him

That was a marked contrast to his position with the Miami Beach force, whise Chief Peter Painter had been carrying on a running feud with the big redhead for twenty years.

Inside the old frame house Shayne and Lucy found Ryan and Milliken watching their expert working on the wall safe It had turned into a tougher job than anyone had expected

"Whatever he's got in there must have been worth guarding all right," the safe man was saying. "This box cost more installed than the house and lot put together."

"Never mind that," the captain said. "The question is: can you open it? Hello Mike. What brings you and Lucy into this particular case?"

"Mostly curiosity," Shayne said.

"At least that's it so far. I've got a case involving hot ice, but so far it hasn't connected up with this. Actually I was talking to Tim Rourke, and he said you were onto a real Chinese puzzle out here."

"Well, you're welcome to look over our shoulders, I guess. I'll want to know the details of your case if you think they tie in, of course."

"Here it comes — I think," the locksmith said. "Yes, I figured that was what was needed."

He made a final delicate adjustment to the safe dial, turned the handle, and swung the door silently open.

"Good work," Ryan said.

He stepped forward and began to lift out the contents of the safe's shelves and line them up on the nearest table. There were two flat tin boxes, locked, a small accounts ledger and a couple of bundles of letters and papers held together by rubber bands. Last of all was a fat and expensive looking soft morrocco leather man's wallet.

Ryan produced a leather keytainer.

"Took this off the stiff," he said. "I figured we'd have more use for them than he does, under the circumstances."

The first key he tried unlocked both the tin boxes. The first one he opened contained two small black leather notebooks. The first had a list of names followed by dates and amounts of money, all written very neatly in an old fashioned flowing script.

"Learned to write by the Palmer method," Shayne said half to himself.

The second notebook was about half full. The entries were in some some sort of code and all ran together without any obvious punctuation.

"Have to turn this over to the code experts," Ryan said. "Do you spot the code, Mike?"

"Never saw anything like it before," the redhead said.

Under the notebooks there was a big, eight-by-eleven inch manila stuffed with sheets of stiff paper and held shut with a paper clip. Ryan left it unopened while he unlocked the second tin box.

This one brought a gasp even from the hardened police officers. At first glance the box appeared to be full of money. The bills were stacked according to denomination — fives to hundreds — and each stack held by rubber bands. It would be tallied exactly later, but it was easy to see that the total could run over five figures.

Under the stacks of green bills was a suede pouch fastened with a drawstring and a flat box of clear plastic divided into eight compartments by removable divider strips. Sunlight coming in the windows of the old house struck into the box and flashed and corruscated where it reflected from the contents.

The compartments appeared to

be full of jewels, sorted by type and gleaming red, blue, green, amethyst, topaz yellow and a dozen allied colors.

"My God," one of the uniformed men said. "There must be a couple of pounds of stones there. What's it worth?"

Ryan plucked out a big ruby that must have gone five or six carats and held it up to the light.

"Better relax, boys," he said. "It'll take an expert to tell us for sure, but I think these are paste imitations. They're good imitations, if that's what they are, but the lot could be bought from any supply house for a couple of thousand dollars."

"Oh no," Milliken protested and hefted the box. "Here I figured for once in my life I was holding a million bucks all at one time. Then you got to spoil it. Couldn't you be wrong, Cap?"

"Sure I could," Ryan said, "but I don't think I am. You look at as many stones as I did in twenty years of police work, you get a feel for the genuine stuff. I've a strong hunch the stuff in the shaving mug was real, but this lot isn't."

"Try the suede bag," somebody suggested, Ryan picked it up and loosened the drawstring. He tipped the small sack — and poured out a cascade of living color that brought the men crowding about the table.

Even an inexperienced eye could see this batch of stones as different from those in the plastic box. The light flashed from every facet in a clear flame of color. These were jewel stones, and top quality to boot. There weren't nearly as many as of the fakes, a bare handful at most, but what there were could only be of first quality. Milliken might have come close to holding half the million he'd spoken of.

All eyes were on the jewels.

Nobody was paying the slightest attention to Mike Shayne, not even Lucy Hamilton.

The big redhead reached out and quietly picked up the wallet that had come from the safe. He ignored the thick sheaf of large denomination bills in the money compartment. Instead he looked at the equally thick pad of identification cards cased in a long plastic strip. As soon as he saw they were all in one name and address he slipped

one out of its sheath at random and stuck it into the breast pocket of his jacket.

He left everything else just as it had been, and put the wallet back on the table, where Ryan picked it up a moment later.

"John," the captain said to Sergeant Milliken, "you make a preliminary list of those stones. If you don't know the right names of some of them, list those by color. We'll get a jeweler to take inventory later."

He himself picked up the wallet from which Shayne had abstracted the card. He opened it and looked at everything that was inside. Then he looked into his own attache case and took out another wallet, one with an official police identification label already attached. This was a cheaper article to begin with — plastic in simulated leather grain, and had seen much harder wear.

Looking over the captain's shoulder, Shayne could see that it contained a driver's license and a couple of credit cards in the name of Dr. J. Smith.

He looked around for Lucy Hamilton and found she'd stepped into the front bedroom and was looking into the closet there.

"That's funny," she said when she saw him.

"What are you talking about? What's funny?"

"Why," she said, "two things. There's some old clothes in the closet and one suit with a Beach tailor's label inside that probably cost three or four hundred dollars. There's one pair of first grade, Swiss-made shoes and a Sulka shirt and tie. All the rest is cheap stuff except one thing."

"What one thing, Angel?"

"This." She held up a small crystal vial about half full of violet covered liquid. "This is one of the most expensive imported French perfumes I ever put to my nose. You probably couldn't buy it for two hundred dollars an ounce. How could a thing like that get into this house?"

"The cops seem to think old Doc was an abortionist," Shayne said. "Maybe one of his customers forgot and left it here when she went home after an operation."

Lucy Hamilton appeared to be thinking that over.

"I don't really think so, Michael," she said. "The sort of woman who would come to a place in this area probably wouldn't use such expensive scent."

"The sort of man who'd live here probably wouldn't have a hand-sewn tailored suit either, Angel, but there's one hanging in the closet right in front of your nose."

"I hadn't thought of that," Lucy said.

"I had," Shayne said. "I'm beginning to think this Doc Smith was a really remarkable type."

He took the little vial of perfume

out of Lucy's hand and dropped it into his own pocket.

"Come on," he said, "I'm going to drop you back at the office and then go see what else I can find out about good old Doc."

IV

AT JUST ABOUT that moment the phone rang on the desk of Abe Steiner, Miami Beach jeweler.

"You had ought to know, Abe," a voice he didn't recognize said over the instrument. "Old Doc's dead."

"What?" Steiner said. "Who are you? Who are you talking about?"

"Old Doc Smith," the voice said. "Bad case of lead in the head. You might even say concentrated lead poisoning."

"I don't understand," Steiner began, but the phone went dead in his hand as the caller hung up.

Steiner was shaking so badly he almost missed the cradle when he went to hang up his own phone. He took a tranquilizer capsule out of a little gold box in his pocket and popped it into his mouth.

The man in the pay phone dropped another dime and dialed again.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Dolly Curtis," he said to the voice that answered. A moment later: "Dolly, Baby? I want that you should be the first to know. They got Doc Smith on a slab at the police morgue. Yes. I said Doc Smith. You know, Baby, you got to know. No, there's no mistake. At least the afternoon edition of the *News* is on the street with the story."

He listened for a moment as she replied.

"No," he said. "Nothing. You don't have to do nothing, Dolly, except sit tight and keep your mouth shut. Later on you'll be called. If there's something you have to do, you'll be called and told what to do. Just remember the sound of my voice, Baby Doll. You're gonna hear it again. You sure are."

She started to say something, but he hung up without paying any attention to what it was.

The next number he called was unlisted with the UN in upper case. It wasn't given out to anyone, anytime, anyway. It had cost him a hundred dollar bill to get it from a girl on the fading side of forty who worked for the telephone company. She was still hoping he'd call again. When he remembered the passion in her, there was a chance he might do that.

When a man's voice answered he made his voice harsh and nasal to disguise its normal timbre.

"This had better be Big Sam," he said. "No, it don't make no matter who I am. The job's done. Old Doc got shot through the head last night with a .22 Bee rifle and scope. A small hole in front of his brains splashed out the back of his head. No question at all he's

dead. You put the price agreed in a coffee can and drop it off the Arthur Godfrey Road bridge into the water at exactly ten tonight. I'll get it all right."

This time when the other voice spoke, the man in the booth didn't hang up. He listened, and his face twisted in anger.

"You're crazy," he said. "I told you I'd handle everything, and I meant everything. This will cost you plenty. Who? Shayne? Mike Shayne?"

He listened and then spoke again. "To start with, you double the amount goes in the coffee can tonight. No. You got no choice at all now, Sam. Neither have I. I got to take care of this Shayne whether you like it or not."

He did hang up then.

In an upper floor office of a quietly luxurious building across the Bay on Biscayne Boulevard, a nice young man who worked for a highly confidential branch of the United States Government took a pair of earphones from his head and leaned back in his comfortable chair.

"Now I wonder what all that was about?" he asked himself. "At least it's all on tape, so maybe somebody will make sense out of it. This whole Carlucci file gets messier by the day."

IN HIS OFFICE on Flagler Street Mike Shayne was giving final instructions to Lucy Hamilton.

"Just sit tight and don't tell anybody a thing," he said. "If Will Gentry calls and wants to know why we were at that house, just say I thought there might have been a tie-in with something I was working on. You don't know what the case was, and I didn't say whether it tied in. Oh — and ask him what was in that envelope that came out of the safe. I didn't get a chance to look in it myself."

"You know, Michael, there are times when Will doesn't think you make much sense. I'm sure this will be another of those times. I agree with him too. Just what are you going to do?"

"What I always do when I need a starter on a case," Shayne said. "I'm going to throw as wide a net as I can into some mighty muddy water and see what comes up when I haul it back in. I'll call you if anything comes up."

"I just hope it isn't the hospital you call from this time," she said to his retreating back as he went out the door and headed for the stairs.

Shayne had a credit card he'd taken out of the wallet from the safe in old Doc Smith's house. The name on the card said *Paul Harroway Curtis,* which meant nothing at all to the big detective, but there was also a street address on Pine Tree Drive in Miami Beach.

Shayne drove across Biscayne Bay by way of the Julia Tuttle Causeway and then over Arthur

Godfrey Road as far as Pine Tree Drive. He turned north there till he came to the number on the card. It was a walled estate with gates standing open and a blue and yellow tiled entrance in the Moorish style.

The bronze name plate on the front of the big pecky-cypress front door hadn't been up long enough to weather badly. It was engraved with the one word: CURTIS. Shayne noticed it didn't say "Dr." or even "M.D.".

When he rang the bell a stout woman in maid's uniform opened the door, said: "Good morning," and waited for his name.

"I'm looking for Mr. Curtis," Shayne told her. "Or maybe I should have said Doctor Curtis?"

"I don't know what you should of said, or you shouldn't," Maria said. "There isn't a doctor nobody round here. No sir. Mr. Curtis isn't here neither right now, and I sure don't know where he is."

"I can wait," the detective said.

"You can, it doesn't matter to me," she said, putting her foot against the inside bottom of the big door so he couldn't push by. "What I do know is you aren't going to do your waiting in this house."

She went to close the door and Shayne blocked it from the outside with his own big foot.

"How about Mrs. Curtis then? This is important."

The maid stopped pushing on the door and looked at him thoughtfully. "How important? Miss Dolly she isn't feeling too good right now. Can you tell me what your business is, so I can ask her?"

"No, I can't," Shayne said. "She'll want to hear it though. I said it's important."

"How important?" she repeated.

He took a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet, folded it lengthwise and held it to the crack in the door. "I'd say just about this important."

"That ain't important enough."

He added a second twenty to the first. This time she took the money and stood aside to let him come in.

"Y'all wait in the Florida Room," she said. "Who shall I tell Miss Dolly is callin'?"

"Tell her Mr. Shayne," he said. "Tell her it's important."

The maid went up the stairs, leaving Shayne to find his own way to the big Florida porch at the back of the house. It looked over a smooth stretch of expensively landscaped grass to the waters of Indian Creek.

There was a small bar at one end of the room. The labels on the bottles were all of expensive brands, and there was ice in an insulated thermos bucket. Shayne mixed himself a brandy and soda. He'd forgotten about lunch and was tired and beginning to be hungry. Then he heard steps in the hall.

Dolly Curtis was an exciting and arresting figure as she stood in the doorway — and was perfectly aware

of the fact. The hostess gown she wore was not quite transparent, but it let Shayne see that she had nothing underneath but lace underwear and her ample self. The blonde curls hung shoulder length, breasts swelled under the lacy bra and the blue eyes were wide and interested in her oval face. Only the mouth was a trifle tight, the hand that held her martini glass had an almost imperceptible tremble to indicate this woman was not quite so carefree as her smile of welcome would have led him to expect.

"Mr. Shayne?" she said. "Do I know you, Mr. Shayne?"

"I'm sorry to say we've never met," Shayne said. "I'm here to ask you a couple of questions about your husband."

The hand holding the martini shook. "I'll get to the point then," she said. "Are you the man who phoned me a little while ago?"

Shayne temporized. "How much would you be interested if I was?"

"Don't play games," she said, making the wrong interpretation. "I want to know how much you know, and most of all I want to know how you found out. That's important to me, and it might be plenty important to you also — that is if you want to live more than a few days longer."

"I don't follow you," he said.

She tossed off what was left of the martini in one gulp, looked around and went over to the bar. Shayne went with her and got gin and vermouth out of the bottle racks. He found ice and a silver shaker and began to mix the cocktails. She stood and waited, shifting impatiently from foot to foot.

"I don't follow you?" Shayne said again. He extended the shaker and poured another martini into her glass. She drank from it thirstily.

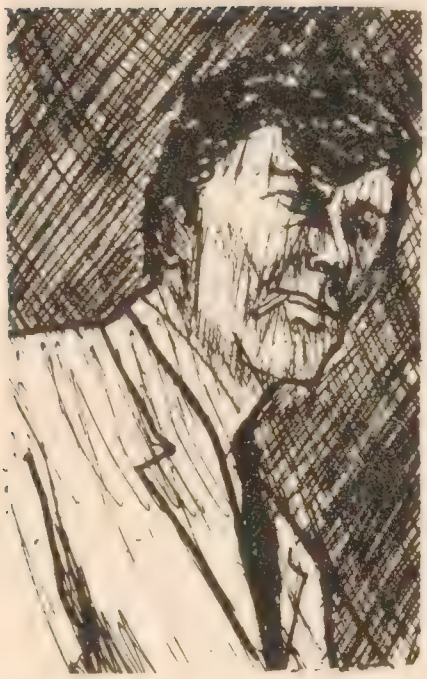
"You make them strong like I do," she said. "That's good." Then —her mood changing—"You better follow me, buster. That is, you better pay attention. Who the hell do you think you're playing footsie with this time anyway? Don't you know he'd have you killed quicker than get the grass cut? Well, he will if he figures you had anything to do with the hit."

"I didn't make the hit, if that's what you mean," Shayne said. "Man that old I'd have used my hands anyway. Why waste a cartridge and chance being caught with a rifle?"

She had turned partly away from him, but now she spun on her heel to face him again. She started to speak but choked off the first word and finished her drink instead.

"Rifle?" she said then. "How do you know it? Nobody said anything about a rifle."

She stopped speaking and threw her glass into a corner, where it shattered on the Spanish-Moorish tile floor. Then she went back to the bar and filled an ordinary whis-



key tumbler with the cocktail mixture.

"I wish I knew which one of you is lying to me," she said, almost petulantly. "You're not the man who called before. I didn't think the voice was the same, and when you say rifle that changes things. To think that he could find us this way."

"Who found you?" Shayne asked. "If I knew then maybe I could help you."

Dolly Curtis whirled on him. "I don't know. Can't you understand I don't know?" She sounded querulous like a baffled child. The wide blue eyes looked about to drip tears. "I told Paul we ought to wait and make sure he was dead before we came here. I told him. But would he listen? Oh no. He was always so smart. 'We'll just plain vanish,' he said. So smart. Now Paul was the one to vanish."

"Why didn't he want to kill?" Shayne asked.

"Too smart for his own good," she said. "Big brain, that was Paul Curtis. Or maybe he was just going soft in his old age. It's happened to better men. Believe me, it's happened to better men often enough."

All of this added up for Shayne to confirmation of his idea that Paul Curtis and Doctor John Smith had been two faces of the same man. He decided to go ahead on that assumption and see what else he could get her to admit.

"Where were you when Paul decided to run?"

"Amsterdam," she said, "Where else? He didn't show at all till we got the stuff. Then he killed Jan and Piet with that lousy rifle of his. So we had to get out and get a new backer. The best of the stuff was here in the States anyway."

She drank some more of the gin and vermouth. By now the cumulative effect was beginning to show. She staggered a little and fell against the big redhead. The hand she put out to steady herself caught his upper left arm. In a moment the fingers curled and caressed his swelling muscle.

Then she let go the arm, made a fist of her hand and pounded against his shoulder.

"You feel safe," she said indistinctly. "Hard and exciting and like you could protect a girl. Mmmm."

Her body was warm and vibrant against him. She smelled of gin and a heavy, aromatic perfume. He wasn't sure but he thought it was different from the scent Lucy had found across the bay.

"I could be good to you," she said against his chest without raising her head. "I could be awful good to you. I'd even split the take. Just stay and help me so I'll feel safe."

"I'll help you if I can," he said and put an arm around her as she pressed closer. "If you want me to, I'll have to have some more information."

She put up her face and kissed him. Shayne had been kissed by all sorts of women, but this one was an expert. It rocked him head to heel.

He stepped away. "Who's going to protect me?"

She laughed. "You don't act like you want protecting, buster. No you don't. Lord, but it's good to have a young man again."

"Why does a woman like you need protection?" he asked. "What's the matter with Paul's backer? Can't he look after things now?"

She was a little unsteady on her feet so they sat down on the long, upholstered divan under the windows. A big white yacht with people drinking on the after deck was making its way north on Indian Creek.

"Him?" she said and there was scorn in her voice. "I don't trust him and I never did. My God, when will I be able to trust anyone ever again? It's awful not to trust anybody — and that reminds me, why should I trust you? You tell me that. Who are you anyway?"

"My name's Mike Shayne."

"I didn't ask that. I don't care what you call yourself. I want to know who you are and what you're doing cutting yourself in on this caper all of a sudden. That's what I want to know. I must be losing my grip or something. If it turns out you're FBI, I'll hang myself. I swear to God I will."

Dolly Curtis paused for breath and watched his face.

"Not FBI," Shayne said. "If you knew Miami, my name would have told you. I'm a private operator, a shamus. Sometimes I help the law but mostly I operate where the money is. When I go, you can get on the phone and check me out. One thing they'll say. If I tell you I'll help you, I will."

He could see she was thinking that over. She started to drink more gin, but thought better of it.

"That doesn't tell me how you got into this thing. Who put you on to Paul and me? For that matter who put the rifle on to where to find us? Tell me that if you can."

"I don't know a thing about your pal with the rifle," Shayne said

with a show of frankness. "As for me I was looking for some missing stones for a client. I heard the cops had found some on the northside and went out to see if they were the same. They weren't, at least not as far as I could tell, but Paul had left identification. Two sets of identification. I followed one of them over here."

"Now why did you do that?"

"Don't be a fool. Uh, what's your name?"

"Dolly," she said. "Mrs. Dolly Curtis. Why don't you answer my question?"

"You know the answer already," Shayne said, and hoped she'd believe him. "My business is money. Just like yours is. Here I find a man with two complete identities. He's got a tin box of money and a little bag of sparklers in a wall safe. Of course I follow up."

"My God," she said. "The cops have his wallet now. Or do you?"

"I don't," Shayne said.

He was slowly circling the room. On one of the walls was an oversized frame montage of enlarged photographs such as many people mount and put under glass. Dolly Curtis was in all the pictures of course. Sometimes she was with an older, foreign looking man whom Shayne assumed must be the husband — either in a large living room or the extensive grounds of a home.

In one picture she was with this man and a younger one. Again she was with the younger man alone. They were in hunting coats and those little felt hats with the feathers that European sportsmen like to wear. The man — he looked to be half her age — had his foot on the neck of a freshly killed deer and was holding a gun in the crook of his arm.

"Who's the young fellow here?" Shayne asked.

"Just my brother," she said indifferently. "It was taken right after he shot that deer."

"And the older man? Your husband?"

"That's right. Not Curtis but the one before — the Dutchman."

As if that had been a signal, somebody at the front door put his finger at the bell and held it down so it kept on ringing.

Maria came out of the back and went to open the door. As soon as she did several men in dark suits boiled in past her. Shayne was on his feet ready to go for a gun until he saw the dapper little man in the silk suit and four inch wide necktie who came after them.

"Hello, Petey," he said to the Miami Beach Chief of Police.

Peter Painter stopped and looked at the pair of them. Dolly's hostess gown had opened to show her bare legs right up to the hilt. Her lipstick was smeared, and she'd suddenly managed to look drunker. Shayne just stood there and grinned at the little Chief.

Painter reacted naturally — for

him. He yelled: "Arrest that man." Then — thought better of it and waved his men back. "I should have known it," he said. "Every time I get a real red hot mess, a case like a Fourth of July picnic, you have to get into the act, Shayne. What have you done now?"

"Not a thing, Petey," Shayne said. "Just paying a call on a friend. An old and dear friend."

"So I see," Painter said with some sarcasm. "That's another thing I never could understand. No matter what the case is, you try to solve it in bed."

"You talk too much," Shayne said. "Dolly might want to sue you for slander. Mightn't you, Dolly?"

"Dolly?" Painter said. "Are you Mrs. Dolly Curtis?"

She nodded.

"Was your husband a doctor, Mrs. Curtis? Was he ever known by any name except Curtis?"

Dolly was a fast thinker, or else she wasn't so drunk as she'd looked for the last ten minutes. "What do you mean was?" she asked. "Has anything happened to Paul?"

"I'm sorry," Painter said. "We have reason to think it has. I'm very much afraid we have to ask you some questions."

"Dolly doesn't know a thing," Shayne said.

"You get out of here," one of the detectives said. "That is unless you want us to run you in."

"You got a charge to hold me on?" Shayne said. "If you do, read me the card about my rights. Otherwise read it to Mrs. Curtis. My advice to her is to answer no questions at all till her lawyer gets here."

"I was beginning to think you were the lawyer," Painter said. "Don't worry. Her rights will be protected."

"Then I'll leave for a while," Shayne said and took a step towards the door.

Dolly Curtis got up and ran to throw herself into his arms. She kissed him hard on the mouth.

"You're coming back?" she said close to his ear.

Shayne kissed her back.

"Tell them nothing," he said. "Act surprised like a shocked wife. Then wait and let nobody in till I get back. I'll help you all I can."

She clung to him. "Hurry back," she said loud enough for the others to hear. "I'll be waiting."

V

THE FIRST THING Mike Shayne did was seek out a pay phone booth on Godfrey Road and call Lucy Hamilton.

"I just saw Petey Painter," he told her and gave a condensed version of what had taken place. "He'll try to find a reason to hold me," he finished, "But I don't think he'll manage it right now."

"You be careful, Michael," she warned. "Painter believes where

there's a will there can always be a way."

"Don't worry," he said. "What have you to report?"

"I wondered if you'd get around to asking," she said. "I think I've hit a couple of jackpots to hand you.

"There's an answer to your Amsterdam cable. Sam Behrens was shot to death by a party or parties unknown. He left a will. The whole estate, including the business papers, if any, went to his widow, Mrs. Dolly Behrens, who was younger, blonde and American. He met her in New York and they'd been married two years. His was a small business so she didn't really get much money. Of course there were probably stones hid out to avoid death duties."

"This is music to my ear," Shayne said.

"They would have tied Mrs. B. to the shooting if they could," Lucy said, "but there wasn't shred one of evidence. She cashed the estate and left the country. For Miami Beach, I gather?"

"Right, Angel. She's talking to Petey now."

"Well, I guess we better hope she doesn't talk too much. Anyway after that I called Will Gentry. He told me they'd turned the Pine Tree Drive address over to Painter, since it's in his jurisdiction.

"I asked him about the envelope and he said it was full of glossy prints of photos of bracelets, rings, expensive looking jewelry. He also said the dead man was shot by a small calibre, high velocity varmint rifle. He said a .22 Bee or Hornet, whatever that is. It just about tore out the back of his skull. Ugh! Is any of this important?"

"It's all important," Shayne said. "Every word of it. Did Gentry know any killer whose M.O. included a rifle?"

"No, he didn't. I'll call him again and ask. He did say though that you should watch yourself. He also said he wants back whatever you took out of the Doc's house. He said nobody saw you take anything, but he knows you too well to believe you didn't get something. He said if it was jewels to tell you they're finding the real stones Doc had were mostly registered and can be identified."

"That's fine, Angel. I didn't take any stones, so it's okay. Did he mention Carlucci?"

"Not a word about Big Sam," she said. "I didn't ask right out, because I wasn't sure you wanted him to know about that case. Was I right?"

"You were absolutely right."

"Thank you, dear," Lucy said. "Michael, can I expect you back on this side of the Bay by dinner time? I could fix us a nice steak at my place, and you could relax."

"I'm afraid not tonight, Angel," Shayne said. "Things over here are getting pretty hairy. For one thing I've got to see Carlucci and tell

him something to keep him happy till I can get his stones back. Why don't you go on home early? I'll call you there later, and try to see you sometime tonight when I can get away, even if it's late."

"I guess I'll have to be satisfied with that," Lucy Hamilton said. "I'll have brandy waiting and be ready to fix you something to eat no matter how late it is. Take care of yourself, Michael, and don't take too many chances."

When Shayne hung up the phone he drove south along Alton Road to the big Burdine's Store parking lot just north of Lincoln Road. From there it was only a short walk over to Steiner's jewelry store. The Lincoln Road Mall was steaming hot and crowded with tourists gaping at the window displays.

Back to the West there were towering thunderheads, where the usual afternoon showers built up over the Everglades. Later on they'd move out to the Beach and bring heavy rains and a welcome cool wind.

The clerks in Steiner's place were pretty sure their boss didn't want to see anyone. Shayne said: "He'll see me," and went on back. He found the door to the private sanctum sanctorum locked from the inside. When he knocked, Steiner called to him to go away. Shayne identified himself and was scanned through a one-way peephole in the door before he was let in.

He found the jeweler in an apparent blue funk. His hands shook and his face had turned a curious grey-white color. He locked and chained the door behind Shayne. On his desk was a bottle of a well-known brand of tranquilizers. The pills hadn't helped him very much.

Shayne looked the man over and decided to get right down to brass tacks.

"You're scared, Abe," he said.

"Scared? No. What would I be scared of?"

"If I was you I'd be scared of Carlucci for one. You've got to know by now that old Doc Smith got his brains shot out last night. That means Will Gentry's on a trail right now that will bring him over here before long. Then he'll know what you and I already know, and then it won't be long till Carlucci knows. Then you can try sending your lawyers to Big Sam. It won't do you any good."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Steiner grabbed for the bottle of pills.

Mike Shayne knocked it out of the jeweler's hands. "For God's sake, don't be any worse fool than you are now. Those little pills won't stop a bullet from Carlucci. That's what you'll get when he finds out how you got back the bracelet you sold him for his wife."

The old man sat back and folded his hands. His lips made a thin line across a face that began to look like that of a stubborn child. He said: "I'll say it again. I got

no idea what you're talking about. Positively no idea."

"Sure you do," Shayne said. "You know. That's why you're so scared you can't think. That's why you can already see yourself in the coffin. You couldn't stand a prison at your age, but Big Sam Carlucci will keep you out of prison. His boys will fix you like Doc Smith was fixed. They'll pick you up by the heels and pour your brains out on the floor like the dregs from a wine bottle."

"Stop it, Mike," Steiner yelled as his control broke. He put his face in his hands and began to sob. "Stop it. Stop it. Who told you? Dolly?"

"No," Shayne said. "Not Dolly. She never said a word except her backer would have me killed if he found me. That's what she thinks of you, Abe.

"Me, I don't think you're that bad. You've been an honest man for too long. I think you just got in over your head before you realized what was happening. That's why I just possibly may be able to help you. We've been friends for years and you know I don't say anything I don't mean. So believe me when I say right now I'm your only chance.

"This Doc Smith or Curtis or whoever he is met Dolly Behrens in Amsterdam and seduced her. Maybe she even knew him before in this country. When he found out the set-up there, he killed Behrens

or had him killed. No heart attack. A bullet. When Dolly inherited all Behrens' stuff, including the drawings and specifications for the pieces he designed, she married Curtis and they moved to the Beach.

"Then one of them got a bright idea. They could duplicate any piece of jewelry in paste. Anyway a jeweler could. Doc was an abortionist for women who use two hundred dollars an ounce perfume. He could get them to let him handle jewels and he could pull the switch — or he made them pay in stones and gave them back phonies so the husband or boy friend would never know. Some of the stuff he probably stole outright.

"Anyway he needed you to make up the phonies and fence the real stones."

"I needed money," Steiner inter-

rupted. "My son, he's a gambler. Loses, loses all the time. I couldn't say no to him. Besides it looked so easy. So easy."

"It always does," Shayne said. "You aren't the first one to find that out. It looks easy till all of a sudden you're looking at a jail cell or down the barrel of a gun. By that time the choices and decisions aren't yours any more."

"I know, Mike. You don't have to tell me. I knew all that when Carlucci's man phoned me today. I knew, but what could I do about it? What?"

"Hold on," Shayne said. "What's that about a phone call from Carlucci?"

"Not from him. One of his men. He called to tell me that Curtis had been killed. I just assumed it meant I would be shot too. Wouldn't you have?"

"Did he say he was calling for Carlucci? In so many words, I mean?"

"Yes. No, he didn't, now that I think of it. He didn't say who he was any more than he made any actual threats. Mike, could it have been the police?"

"It could not," Shayne said. "The police here are honest. And it wasn't Carlucci because Carlucci doesn't even know about Curtis yet, let alone any connection with you. Besides he'd call himself and spell out what he wanted."

"Who then?" Steiner almost begged. "Who else knows about my part in this?"

"I can't be sure," Shayne said and tugged at his ear lobe. "At least I think I know who would do it, although I don't know his name. It must be the same man who killed Curtis. I think he also killed others in Amsterdam — maybe even Sam Behrens, if Curtis didn't do that job for himself."

"Curtis wasn't the killer type," Steiner said. "I knew him well enough to know that."

"How can you be sure of that? Greed has made men willing to kill often enough. Think about your answer now. It's important. Maybe even life or death for you. So think."

"Well," Steiner said. "How can I think with things what they are? Well, then — Curtis used to come here after closing time for conference with me. He liked to talk and boast, and I guess there wasn't anybody else but his wife he could boast to. He admits he was thinking of arranging an accident for Behrens. That is after he and Dolly were lovers and he was shaping up his plans. He insisted though that he didn't have to. Whoever shot Behrens did him — Curtis — the world's biggest favor and never knew it. He used to really laugh about it."

"You're sure he wasn't lying just to throw you off the track, in case you cracked and talked?"

"I'm just about as sure as a

man can be. I got to know Curtis well, and I'm sure he wouldn't have lied to me about that. He gave every sign of being sincere, and he certainly thought it was a great joke. I don't think he could have faked all the belly-laughing he did. Does that help?"

"It helps a lot, Abe. In fact it pretty well tells me who the killer has to be. At least enough so I can find him. It tells me what your phone call this afternoon had to mean. You aren't slated for killing right now. What that call meant was a first move to let you know you're going to have a new partner. The killer figures on taking Curtis' place in this set-up, but this time he won't get the stones by short or long con. He'll run true to type and get them with the gun."

"Oh my God, no," Steiner said. "I won't do it. I won't work with a cold-blooded killer."

"Sure you will," Shayne said. "He can't make jewelry any more than Curtis could. He has to have you in. If you were fool enough to refuse, you already know too much to be let live. The choice he'll give you is cooperate and make money, or he'll kill you with that rifle of his. That's what happens when you go for a fast buck."

"I won't—"

"Sure you will. That is unless I can take him first. That's the only chance you have left. You don't have a choice. You do what I say or what he says."

"And if I do what you say, Mike?"

"In that case I do my level best to save your life, even to keep you out of jail. I hope I can do both."

"What do I have to do?" The jeweler showed his first signs of hope.

"When I leave you, lock yourself in here and start writing. First you write out and sign a full confession to the whole caper. Give names, dates, what you remember of conversations, everything you can think of.

"As I get it, the operation went like this. You and Curtis decided which pieces could be duplicated. If you didn't know who had a specific item, he and Dolly tried to find out in his Curtis role. Then, as Doc Smith the abortionist, he set it up to get the stones in his possession long enough for you to make the duplicates. I think you'll also find he did some straight blackmail where he didn't have to give back a duplicate. That would explain the loose stones in his wall safe. After "Smith" had a piece duplicated you fenced and resold the original stones. I suppose you recut any that could have been recognized by other jewelers. Do I have it all there?"

"That's right. I still don't see how you figured it out."

"I'm a detective," Shayne said. "I just figured out what I'd do if I was Curtis-Smith. I just used

logic and checked out what it told me. I found out long ago nothing happens without a reason in crime or any other area, so I like to think of the possible reasons."

"So you had to find me?"

"Right. And now there's something else you have to do. When you've written your confession you start writing checks. Keep on writing them until you've made full and complete restitution to everybody whose name you know that lost any jewelry or money through you and Curtis. Do that and then get your lawyer. Take the checks and the confession to Will Gentry and surrender yourself.

"Do that and I can help by swearing you did your part of this under Curtis' threat to kill you. I think you can get off. Anything less and nobody will be able to keep you out of jail."

Steiner groaned. "You're right. I'll be ruined in my business anyway.

"You should have thought of that long ago," Shayne said, "but if you think you'd rather go to jail too, just suit yourself. It's the only place you have left." He got to his feet.

"I should thank you," Steiner said suddenly. "You're being better to me than I deserve." Then he got up and held out his hand and the detective shook it. "Where are you going now, Mike?"

"I'm going to look for a killer," Shayne said. "I'm afraid he's smart enough to be looking for me by now. If he finds me first, I'd appreciate your coming to my funeral." He turned on his heel and left the office.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE'S next stop was a penthouse suite at one of the newer and more elaborate of the Miami Beach hotels. The suite was on the books as a hotel hospitality special, reserved for extremely important guests. The actual occupant was Big Sam Carlucci whenever he was in town.

Before Shayne could even get in the special express elevator running to that floor the clerk had to phone a special "secretary" bodyguard and describe the redhead. He also had to inspect the detective's identification. Then there was a wait while Big Sam himself was consulted.

Only after all that was the elevator brought up from the basement. The operator was accompanied by two armed hoods who rode with him at all times. Shayne decided that Carlucci probably owned this particular hotel—something he hadn't known before—and made a mental note of that fact for future reference.

There were two more guards in the foyer where the elevator finally came to rest. They temporarily removed Shayne's gun from its belt holster before rapping a code on the heavy mahogany door leading into the penthouse proper.

Inside the apartment an English butler in frock coat and formal trousers led the detective to a magnificently furnished living room. One whole wall was plate glass looking out over the beautiful Atlantic to the dark line that marked the course of the Gulf Stream only a few miles off shore.

Big Sam Carlucci was waiting, wearing a velvet smoking jacket which looked completely incongruous on his muscular body. With the big hoodlum was a slender, dark-haired woman who was his wife. She wore a simple blue linen dress which was actually a one thousand dollar, one-of-a-kind creation by one of the most fashionable Paris coutouriers.

"My wife, Alida," Carlucci said. "This is the detective I told you about, baby."

Alida Carlucci was extraordinarily beautiful, with clear, classical features and a figure that reminded Shayne of a high fashion model.

She moved forward and took his hand.

"I've wanted to meet you for years, Mr. Shayne," she said.

She was in front of her husband then and looking into Shayne's face. Her eyes were anything but those of a serene and collected hostess. He got the distinct impression that she was pleading with him for something that he was supposed to realize for himself. The woman was

frightened, but not as panic-stricken as the old jeweler had been.

"I feel very fortunate that you've come to visit us," she said, and there was both question and appeal in the way she said it.

"You flatter me, Mrs. Carlucci," Shayne said.

He gave her hand an almost imperceptible pressure before he released it. He thought to himself that she probably feared he'd tell Carlucci the methods by which "Doc Smith" had operated to steal her jewelry.

"I told her how good you were supposed to be," the gangster said. "You ain't going to make a liar out of me, are you, Shayne? Not after all the good things I've heard about you."

"No," Shayne said, "I don't exactly aim to do that. It seems to me though you'd have some fast questions to fire at me right now."

Carlucci got up and paced rapidly back and forth in front of the window with hands shoved deep into the pockets of his expensive slacks.

"Maybe I should," he said. "But being it's me, maybe I'd rather you gave the answers without me having to ask the questions." His voice was almost sneering. "You think you can do that, Mr. Perry Mason Shayne? You're so good, maybe you can do that for me."

There was something wrong in the man's attitude and tone, and Mike Shayne sensed it right away. It fitted in with the overly elaborate precautions taken when he was allowed to come up to the penthouse. He didn't think that many guards were standard operating procedure on Miami Beach where organized crime overlords had always maintained a working if informal, truce with each other.

The big detective decided to make an assumption and bank on it's being a good one. This had been his day for hunches anyway. He decided to trust this new one and play it for all that it was worth.

"I'll do just that," he said. "I think any good detective could do the same. It's just a matter of logic, but here goes anyway. If I miss anything, you can always stop me and ask about it. If I was the client, the first question would be, did you find my jewels. The answer is yes."

He saw Mrs. Carlucci tense until the muscles stood out along the jawline, but curiously enough he got no reaction from her husband. The man already knew.

"Second," Shayne said, "will you get them back and what will it cost? Yes. And it'll cost nothing but my regular fees you agreed to this morning."

Again there was no reaction except that Mrs. Carlucci looked as if she might faint. Shayne wondered how she had lost the stones and how much her husband actually knew about old Doc Smith's activities. He'd begun to expect that it might be quite a lot.

"Next thing I'd ask is do I know who had them? Yes again. The man's dead. No, I didn't kill him. You don't owe me a thing for that. He had your stones though, and all you have to do is to officially report them lost. They'll be identified by professional jewelers and returned to you."

The woman was holding herself so rigid that a very light trembling of the mouth and hands had begun. Her husband didn't or wouldn't notice. Shayne decided she'd had enough pressure and he'd do something about it.

"Do I know how he managed the theft? No. I don't have any details on that, and now that he's dead I doubt if anyone will ever find out. He was a pretty slippery character anyhow."

Alida Carlucci relaxed with a sound that was almost a sob. She tried to cover by making a cough

of it. There was a dew of perspiration on her brow and the palms of her hands. Shayne was sure now that some form of blackmail had been involved. How many women had reason to want Curtis dead? He supposed there could be dozens of them.

"Now we get down to the real nitty gritty in the question line," Shayne said, taking the plunge he'd been building up to. "Just for instance like do I know who called you on the phone this afternoon?"

He got his reaction this time, but the roles were reversed. Alida quite obviously didn't care about a phone call. The big question had already been resolved for her.

It was Big Sam Carlucci who whirled to face the detective with his face going hard as flint. Shayne knew his hunch had been a good one. The rifleman had talked to Carlucci. If Shayne played his cards right, he might even figure out exactly what had been said.

Carlucci spun on his wife.

"Get out," he said simply. "I want to talk to Shayne alone."

She turned away, but as she left the room she walked within a few feet of Mike Shayne. In passing she gave him a look from those beautiful brown eyes which was full of gratitude, warmth and, he was almost sure, of warning.

As soon as she'd left the room Big Sam turned on Shayne. "Okay, shamus, what do you know about a phone call?"

"I know you got one, and you wish you hadn't," Shayne said. "That's why you have guards all over the place tonight. Did he just threaten you or ask for money too? What did he offer to sell you?"

"I hope he offers to sell me your head, wise guy," Carlucci snapped at him. "I'll pay him a good price."

"What will you pay me for his?" Shayne asked.

That brought the hood up short. His dark eyes bored into Mike Shayne's as if they could see right through the brain and skull and out the back of the head.

"Do you know who called?" he asked.

"Yes," Shayne said. "At least I know who he is and what he is, and why he really killed Doc Smith. The only thing I don't know is the one thing you want to hear from me. I don't know his name or address. I expect to have both those items by morning though. I'll listen to any offer you make then."

For just a second Shayne thought Carlucci was going to hit him. He stepped closer and cocked his fist back. Shayne stepped in in turn and caught the gangster's wrist.

"Don't try anything you'll be sorry for," he said.

Carlucci made himself relax and step back.

"I don't have to dirty my hand on you," he said. "If I thought for a minute you'd dare hold out on me, I'd call the boys in here and burn

the soles off your feet with a hot iron. Who is that guy?"

"Before anybody put an iron to my feet," Shayne said flatly, "you wouldn't be here to watch. That's because you'd be dead. Push me again, and I'll demonstrate."

He let go of Carlucci's wrist and let him step back out of reach. Shayne pulled up his right pants leg to show a small but deadly derringer strapped to the calf of his leg.

"Your boys made a poor job of frisking me," he said. "This one isn't very big, but a .22 high velocity hollow-point will blow up your heart just like a cannon at close range."

Shayne dropped the trouser leg to conceal the little gun again. "Now suppose you tell me how come the killer knew to call you in the first place."

"I don't know." Carlucci was lying and Mike Shayne knew it.

"Sure you know, Sam. You'd been doing business with him, but it was his idea and you did it by phone. That's why you don't know his name. Now he's turned on you."

"If you're so damned smart," Carlucci said, "why don't you tell me the rest of it? You're bluffing."

"I'm not like you," Shayne said. "I don't bluff, and I don't get into something I can't get myself out of. For one thing Will Gentry knows where I am. That's just in case you get any more stupid ideas about calling your boys into this.

"I think this killer called you and said he could get your bracelet back for a price, and you agreed to pay him. Then you got to thinking about it and decided you wanted an ace in the hole, so you came to see me. He went ahead and killed Smith because he was going to do that anyhow. He thinks it's funny you've got to pay him for that.

"Then he called back for his money and you were dumb enough to let him know I was in the picture. Then he threatened you or maybe just demanded more money."

"You're crazy, shamus. Nobody threatens Big Sam Carlucci."

"I say he did, and he'll make it stick too," Shayne said. "This one isn't out of your Families. He doesn't give a damn for the likes of you. With that rifle he uses he can reach out half a mile and kill you any time he likes, so when he tells you, you've got to jump."

"He can reach you too, Shayne."

"I hope he thinks so. I'm counting on it, because when he tries I'm going to take him. He's coming to me just like a steer walks to the knacker back in your home town, Chicago. Now why not tell me where the money drop is so I can cover you?"

Carlucci laughed in his face. "What money drop, Shayne?" There's no money drop. There ain't gonna be one. You been smoking pot or something?"

"Of course there'll be a money

drop," Shayne said. "The man wants money. They always want more money. Murder is a mighty expensive hobby. He isn't stupid enough to come here for it or give you a mailing address. So he has to set up a drop. You can't take your own boys for guards. He'll be watching for that. But if you tell me now where it is, I can stake it out and end all your troubles at one time."

"Hah," Big Sam snorted. "And why will you do me that favor? What do you get out of it?"

"I'm not greedy," Shayne said. "Suppose I say I'll be satisfied with half of what you're going to give him anyway. For that I'll take the rifleman and give you back whatever you drop for him. At least I'll give you back half the drop and his head on a dish. That ought to be worth the other half."

"Maybe I'd rather have him give me your head, Shayne. Had you thought of that? I can get him for myself later on."

"Suit yourself," Shayne said. "Only don't be too sure about taking him later on. He'll have good cover if you let him slip away this time. That is unless I get him which I will, and if I recover the money without help from you I keep all of it. Believe me I do. Besides I won't blackmail you later, and he will. Just believe me he will."

The big hood turned his back on Shayne and walked over to stand and look out the big picture window at the sea.

"My heart is bleeding," Carlucci said. "It is really bleeding. You dumb shamus, I don't get where I am by letting bums like this one get away with nothing. I hired you to get back my stones. When they're delivered to my lawyer in Miami, you'll get your check. That's all you get. Now scram. Go out of here. Get lost. Drop dead."

"Suit yourself," Shayne said. "You had your chance." He went out into the foyer and made the guards give him back his forty-five before they took him down in the elevator.

"Take good care of your boss, boys," he told them. "Tonight he's living dangerously."

Nobody said anything at all.

In front of the hotel the doorman stopped him.

"Would you mind getting your

car out of the lot yourself, Mr. Shayne?" the man asked and held out the keys to him. "It's down at the end of the lot near the sea wall and the boys are pretty busy with the cocktail hour rush right now."

Then the normally dignified doorman gave Shayne a wink so fast the big man almost missed seeing it entirely.

On the strength of the wink, Shayne took the keys and started walking in the direction indicated. He wasn't really surprised to see a figure in the front seat of his parked car before he reached it.

Shayne's first reaction was to wonder if Big Sam Carlucci had sent one of his hoods downstairs to head him off and take him out of the picture at least temporarily. Then he realized that the head, even seen from the rear, was decidedly feminine.

After that he wasn't surprised to recognize Alida Carlucci. She kept her beautiful profile turned straight ahead as he got into the driver's seat beside her.

"Can we drive some place and talk privately?" she asked then. Whatever strain she'd been under in the penthouse there'd been time since for her to become calm and collected. Her voice was cool and impersonal, her diction perfect.

Shayne started the motor without saying anything at all. He tried to circle the car so as to get out of the lot without passing too close to any of the hotel people. She helped by taking a scarf out of her bag and putting it around her head in such a way that it hid her face.

He headed for a bar in midtown that was small and dimly lit and not flashy enough to attract Carlucci's friends for patrons. Shayne had been there often before, but the bartender was the discreet type. He never let on that he recognized a customer who failed to greet him as an old friend. Most of all he never looked closely enough at any woman so that he could identify her later on for her husband.

Shayne took a booth in the rear where he could keep an eye on both doors to the room. A little to his surprise she told the man to bring a bottle of one of the better brandies, and to leave it on the table. She waited till the man had left and Mike Shayne had poured them each a drink before speaking.

"Did my husband tell you all that you wanted to know, Mr. Shayne?" she asked.

"Call me Mike," he said. "All my friends do. No. He told me a lot more than he intended, but not the most important thing of all for me to know."

"Maybe I can make up for him then," she said, and sipped some of the brandy. "Women are curious creatures, Mike. I mean nosy. We listen on extension phones. Sometimes it's a thing we have to do in self defense. We listen behing doors too."

"Why then you know what he

wouldn't tell me, Mrs. Carlucci?"

"I know and I'll tell you. But if it's going to be Mike just call me Alida. Now let me tell you the part he left out."

"Why tell me, Alida?" Shayne asked. "Your husband wouldn't want you to do that."

"Maybe that's why I'm bound to do it," she said and drank more of the brandy. "Ah, that's good. I'm not often frightened, Mike, and when I am I find brandy a sovereign remedy. I'll tell you because I hate Sam, but I don't want to be responsible for his death. I don't want to be responsible for yours either, but I think you can take care of yourself better than Sam.

"He wouldn't like it if he heard me say that. He's so proud of being tough and hard and pitiless. So proud that sometimes he forgets to be a human being. But that's neither here nor there and I don't want to bore you, Mike. Truly I don't."

"There is a payoff set up?" Shayne reminded her.

"Oh yes. Of course there is just as you figured. There were two phone calls this afternoon from our mystery man. The first one was a warning to shake Sam up, I think. But the caller got shaken some too when he heard Sam had hired you too to get the bracelet back for him. You see the caller had phoned Sam a couple of days ago and said he knew who had the stones and could get them for five thousand dollars. Sam said go ahead. Later he figured he wanted insurance and you could give it to him. The voice didn't like that.

"Later in the day, not long before you showed up, he called a second time. They made final arrangements. The man said he'd kill you too before you brought the cops to Sam. That would cost another five thousand. Sam is to put all the money in hundred dollar bills in a coffee can and seal it under one of those plastic lids. He is to go alone tonight at ten o'clock and throw the can into Indian Creek off the exact center of the little Arthur Godfrey Road bridge.

"It must be exactly at ten and he must do it from the north side of the bridge. He can't bring anyone with him. After the call he's to go home and wait for another call that will tell him you're dead. I don't really suppose there'll be a call, though. Why should there be?"

"There'll be a call, Alida," Shayne said, "and another one tomorrow and then one after that. This guy's a blackmailer among other things and he won't lose the chance to call any phone number where he can get ten thousand dollars for making threats. You got to remember he knows how Doc Smith got the bracelet even if Sam doesn't."

"Sam would kill me," she said and shuddered. Shayne filled her glass with brandy and waited while she drank some. "It was all per-

fectly innocent as far as I'm concerned, but he'll never believe me. I took a friend for an operation. Somebody else had told her about the doctor. I just went along so she wouldn't be afraid.

"There was a camera hidden some place. He got pictures of me standing beside that operating table. He has pictures of an operation going on that don't show the woman's face. Sam wants a son so bad he's going crazy. He'd kill me sure if he thought I'd had his child aborted.

"Of course I gave that horrible old man money and the bracelet. I guess I'd have given him anything he wanted, but all the time I knew it wouldn't do any good. He'd never stop threatening. If I couldn't pay, he'd go to Sam. Until the doctor was killed I was desperate. I couldn't see any way out."

"There was one," Shayne said. "The simplest way of all. You could have gone to the police."

"Not if you're Mrs. Big Sam Carlucci," she said. "Not then you couldn't."

She gave the detective a wry and bitter smile. "Now this rifleman is next in line as a blackmailer, isn't he? That's why I'll tell you anything I possibly can that may help you to find him. I'm not really being very generous to do that, am I? Mostly I'm just being selfish."

"Don't look at it that way," Shayne said. We're helping each other with this thing. If he'd blackmail you, he wants to kill me. I'll always be grateful to you."

"Mike," she said, "can you really take him tonight? Do you know who he is? You're not just bluffing, are you? Don't kid me, Mike. Not about anything that important. Please."

"I won't kid you," he said. "I don't know his name, but I do know who he has to be. I think I know what he'll do next, and I can be ready for him. I honestly think I can take him tonight instead of him killing me. But enough of that. What are you going to do now?"

"Why, go home to the hotel. What else?"

"You can't do that. Sam will have missed you by now. He may even guess where you are. Anyway he'll find out if he has to beat it out of you when you get back. I'm going to give you a note to my secretary, Lucy Hamilton. Will you take a cab to her apartment and stay there overnight or until I call you later tonight? I'd rather you were out of the way, at least till after the money drop."

Mrs. Carlucci thought it over. "I'm willing to do that, Mike, but you realize Sam will be furious with you when he finds out. He resents it bitterly when anyone interferes in his affairs. He may try to have you hurt."

"I'm sure he would if he thought he could get away with it," Shayne said. "When the time comes I'll just have to convince him that sort of

thing will cost him a great deal more than it's worth. So don't worry about Sam or anyone else right now. Don't worry about any pictures Doc might have had of you or your friends. If they were at his house, the police have them now. Will Gentry's a decent man. He won't give them to the papers."

She flashed him a smile. It was the first one he'd seen on her face. "Thanks. Then I'll gladly accept your girl's hospitality. If it doesn't inconvenience her too much, I mean. I could go to a hotel, I suppose."

"At a hotel there's always a chance you'd be recognized, he said. "We don't want that. Besides Lucy will enjoy your company."

He wrote the note and gave it to her and then phoned for a cab.

When it arrived he gave the driver the address, paid him a liberal tip, and sent her off.

When Alida had gone Shayne went back inside the bar and had an extension phone plugged in at the table in his booth. First he called Lucy Hamilton and told her who was coming and why.

Then he made an overseas call which he charged to his office phone. It was late at night in Amsterdam by then, of course, but he managed to get the police switchboard operator there to connect him with a lieutenant of homicide. Luckily for Shayne the man he talked to was familiar with the investigation at the time of Sam Behrens' death.

He was able to give the redheaded private detective at least some of the information he wanted, including a check of Dutch sporting records and a name from the membership list of the Royal Dutch Riflemen's Club, and promised to have a more complete report sent by cable in the morning. Like most continental police officers, the lieutenant spoke excellent English.

At the end of that conversation Shayne was certain in his own mind that the puzzle pieces in this case had been fitted together. He knew pretty well who the rifleman was, although he still didn't have a name for the man, and he was sure what the killer would try next.

Shayne still had time on his hands before the ten o'clock rendezvous to drop the money. He spent the first part of it having dinner at a favorite Italian restaurant on the Beach. Like Napoleon, Mike Shayne figured a man did his best thinking or fighting with a full meal under his belt.

He left his car in a Godfrey Road parking lot and took the bus down to Lincoln and Alton Roads.

VII

HIS NEXT MOVE was to go to a boat rental marina and rent a skiff with a small outboard motor. He went north in this boat until he reached the vicinity of the Ar-

thur Godfrey Road bridge. Inquiry at the marina had told Mike Shayne that at ten o'clock the tide would be pushing the water of the creek south and east, downtown toward the Bay.

Shayne accordingly tied his skiff to a private dock a short ways south of the bridge, stretched out with his head on a thwart, and proceeded to wait for ten o'clock.

The time passed swiftly enough and the hardest part of the wait was to keep from moving around enough to draw attention to the fact he was there at all.

There was heavy traffic on the streets of Miami Beach, as there would be all day and all of the night except for a half hour or so just before dawn. The street and building lights were bright enough to make it easy to see about him.

An occasional pedestrian crossed the walkway at the side of the small, high-arched bridge, and Shayne had no trouble recognizing Carlucci when the big man arrived.

He let the boat drift into the shadow of the private dock and kept his head down.

The big hood walked right out to the middle of the bridge, faced upstream as he'd been instructed, and tossed the small two-pound coffee can full of money into the water.

Shayne never heard the shot or saw the muzzle flash. He was watching Carlucci, and the shot had come from behind him — downstream, the direction in which the money was drifting.

He was close enough to hear the *thock* the bullet made hitting flesh and bone directly between the shoulder blades. The small, high velocity pellet traveled at terrific speed and blew up on impact. The shock was enough to throw Carlucci forward onto the high parapet of the bridge.

It was too high for him to go all the way over into the water. He stayed there like a man leaning over to watch the lights glimmer on the water. Great gouts of blood came out of the exit wound in his chest and splashed in the stream.

Shayne knew he had a minute or two. To be able to draw such a bead on Carlucci the killer had to be at least on the same level. That meant either on the bank or the deck of a moored yacht or in the window of one of the buildings downstream.

He also had to have a boat waiting so he could pick up the money as it floated down to him, but it would take him a moment to scramble down and get aboard.

Shayne gave a yank on the outboard's starter cord to get his own motor purring, and cast off the painter. As he got up steerageway the skiff moved smoothly out into the stream and headed up against the current. With one big hand Shayne held the tiller while he scooped the floating can out of the water with the other.

The bullet took splinters from the gunwale of the skiff in a white spray of wood where his arm had just been. The man downstream had reacted fast and, considering the tricky visibility, with a remarkable accuracy.

A second shot hit the water off to Shayne's left and riccocheted like a skipped flat stone with a long, vibrant wail of sound.

After that Shayne was in the black shadow under the bridge.

The sniper didn't try again. He had to be running for his boat to pursue the detective while he was still in sight. It wouldn't be hard to see a boat in the broad open stretch above the bridge.

Over the redhead's head he heard feet pounding the bridge. When his boat shot out into the light upstream there were two figures looking over the rail. At least one was waving a gun. He had to assume these were Carlucci's bodyguards, who had thought any attack would be from close by—poor thinking with a rifleman involved but natural enough for backshooting thugs.

Shayne got off one shot from his own gun. He wasn't really trying to kill anybody, so he fired at the stone coping of the bridge. The heavy three hundred grain hollow-point slug broke a spray of stone chips and hurled them in the men's faces. They ducked back and down by instinct.

Before they could come up again and start shooting the skiff was past

the point where accurate fire could be delivered from their stump-barreled, aluminum frame hideout guns. They realized it and ran back to try and follow by running along the seawall.

Shayne wasn't really worried about Carlucci's boys. If he had been, he could have killed at least one of them with his forty-five. Mike Shayne hated to kill when it could be avoided.

He wished he could think the same of the man in the fast inboard boat that shot through the bridge shadow just as his own skiff reached the first bend. It was fast enough to be walking right up on his outboard, and he knew it.

His only chance was to get ashore fast. He nosed his craft to the left,

stuffed his gun into its holster and hefted the coffee can in one big hand.

In the seconds before the pursuer could round the bend Shayne brought his skiff parallel to the sea wall, tossed the coffee can onto someone's lawn, grabbed the wall with both hands and swung himself up. He lit prone and rolled back from the lip of the concrete wall just as the fast launch came in sight.

The rifleman was steering with a knee hooked over the tiller. He snapped off a shot that cracked the outboard motor and made the skiff veer helplessly.

At that moment Carlucci's two hoods pounded along the bank and burst upon the scene. They opened up with their thirty-eights right off the bat. Winded as they were, and still running Shayne never really knew if they fired at him or the launch. The rifleman shot the smaller hood through the head.

Shayne put a slug through the larger man's leg to knock him down and temporarily paralyze him. Then he rolled in the grass, got up to sitting position and fired at the rifleman.

He missed, and the launch shot around the upstream bend of Indian Creek. He could hear the motor whine as it poured on speed.

Shayne cursed as he got to his feet. He'd planned to ambush the boat as it came around the first bend and settle with the rifleman once and for all. The plan would have worked except for the interference by Carlucci's gunsels. They were out of the picture now, but they'd managed to ruin Mike Shayne's timing.

The rifleman was up ahead, armed and unhurt and sure to come back. If he could spot the redhead at any sort of range, Shayne was a dead duck, and he knew it. He had to get under cover fast.

Then he realized where he was. The next house north of the lawn where he sprawled was Dolly Curtis' big pseudo-Moorish palace.

Shayne was up and running. On the flagstone terrace he slammed his gun barrel through the pane of a glass door, reached through for the knob and was inside the Florida room where he and Dolly had talked earlier in the day. A single bulb burned in a lamp with a red silk shade. Dolly, her blonde hair flowing and a drink in her hand, jumped up from the lounge chair where she'd been sitting and stifled a scream.

"It's only me, honey," Shayne said.

Rumpled, grass-stained, hatless and with the big gun in his hand, he was a wild enough figure to startle anyone. "Put out that light. Fast. He'll be back any second."

"Back?" she yelled, but jumped to obey. "Back? Who? Carlucci?"

"I wish it was," Shayne said in the darkness. "No. Big Sam's dead and bleeding in the water. It's the rifleman. He'll be looking for me,

and I aim to blast him when he does"

"No. Oh, no." she said. "Let me hide you, Mike. He'll kill you for sure."

"This time he won't. At close range I'll break him in half with a forty-five."

"Mike, I'm afraid. If he finds you here, won't he kill me too? You have to go."

"If I get out in the open," Shayne said, "it means I'm dead. I wait him out here so this time he has to come under my gun. Maybe he'll try to kill you, honey, as a witness, but I aim to have him first. If you make a move to warn him, I'll kill you myself. Believe me, baby. Believe me."

"I warn him?" she said, startled. "Mike, you know I wouldn't do that. I'm afraid. The idea's insane. Why should I?"

Behind her the air moved the heavy drapes drawn partly across the arch leading to the dark living room. The only light on the ground floor now was a dim bulb somewhere on the stair well out of Shayne's line of vision. He could see her as a dark column topped by a pale oval face and the cascade of blonde hair.

"Why should I?" she said again, and took a step forward.

"I'm not an idiot," Shayne said, low and cold with ice in his tone. "If you weren't with him, you wouldn't have known about Carlucci. If you hadn't been with him from the start, Sam Behrens would be alive. He'd never have known where to find old Doc Smith, and you wouldn't be a widow tonight."

Outside in the night they heard the scream of police sirens down by the Godfrey Road bridge.

"Shayne," she said brokenly. "How can you, Shayne?" She took another step and let her robe fall open so that even in the dim light he could see her naked breasts. Under the long robe her bare feet made no sound on the carpet.

"There was only one person I had any clue to in this whole mess who would be good with a rifle," Shayne said remorselessly. "That's the kid brother in the picture on the wall here. The one who shot the deer. I called the Amsterdam police tonight. They remember him as a medal-winning tournament competitor with the rifle. A wild spending kid who's also a crack shot. To me that added up."

"Mike. Believe me, dear, you're wrong. I can explain. I can explain everything if you'll only listen."

Her eyes widened and she turned her face to look out at the lawn. Her body froze in alarm.

Big Mike Shayne reacted with lightning speed. He spun around and fired three shots in the opposite direction, into the living room back of the half-drawn drapes. His second bullet smashed the rifleman's right shoulder and stretched him, disarmed and paralyzed, on the expensive oriental rug.

EPILOGUE

"She had to be in it," Shayne told Peter Painter when the police, attracted by the shooting, came to the house. "The rifleman knew too much all the time. He had to have a confederate on the inside. Tonight the Amsterdam homicide people told me Behrens' widow had a younger brother who was a great hunter. She married the Dutch jeweler to get his stock and papers. She planned to run off with Curtis and set up this caper. The kid brother got impatient waiting for Behrens' bum ticker to kill him, and used his gun.

"Tonight, when he used his key to come in the front door, the draft blew the drapes. That's why she couldn't fool me by pretending to see him outside. I just knew what to expect."

"I follow you so far," Painter said, "but why kill Curtis-Smith? Things were going well for them, weren't they?"

"When he can talk," Shayne looked at the rifleman on the police stretcher, "he'll tell you. My guess is he and Doc were both greedy. Besides, each one knew the other was already party to a murder. This boy just happened to make the hit first. Right, Dolly?"

Dolly Curtis was weeping and didn't answer.

"What tipped you first?" Painter asked.

"The thing that should have tipped you," Mike Shayne said. "The killer didn't search Doc's house or take his papers, but he knew enough to phone Abe Steiner and Sam Carlucci. Quite obviously, then, the murderer had to be some one on the inside."

MIKE SHAYNE Presents Next Month's Three Headliners:

●

YACHT TRIP TO DEATH by BRETT HALLIDAY
The New Mike Shayne Short Novel

●

THE MAN WHO STOLE ATLANTIC CITY by DAVID MAZROFF
A True Crime Gangster Story

●

THE ABRAXAS AFFAIR by JERRY JACOBSON
An Exciting Action Novelet

The Big Difference

by LEW GELLERT

There was really nothing between him and a fortune. Nothing that a little gun couldn't cure.

I HID IN THIS bedding department until the whole big department store was dim and empty. I knotted my shoes together and slung them around my neck. Now I padded down this escalator—the power was off, is the only difference—and I stopped off at this glove counter and fitted myself with a pair of gloves. Nothing but the best.

Then I went over to this luggage department and picked out a couple of suitcases, lightweight but roomy and strong. If I had to buy them, I would've chosen different: the excise taxes would've made me think twice.

Next I headed for the hardware department. Here I shopped for tools. In one bag I put hammer, crowbar, screwdrivers, and all like that, and even an electric drill set and an extension cord, just in case, If I had to carry my tools all the way to a job I wouldn't've taken half the stuff, but this was different. I even threw in a propane cutting torch.

Now I followed the signs to the jewelry department. I took out the tools, and saw I wouldn't need the drill or the torch. I broke open these display cases, nice and easy, and scooped into the suitcases hundreds of pearl chokers and necklaces, bracelets, rings, watches, the works.

Then I moved on to this radio department and chose a couple dozen of these tiny transistor radios. Next came this photographic equipment department. Even though I tried to distribute the weight evenly the suitcases were growing heavy. But I picked out a dozen of the smallest and most expensive cameras.

All this time an adding machine was going inside my head, counting up how much all this stuff would bring from some fences I know. This was the first time I had tried a haul of this kind. Usually I broke and entered little shops. But I decided it was time to try something different. For one thing, I didn't want to get in a rut. For another, I figured I find a wider selection of stuff here.

Things are different now. You know the trend nowadays—no more the small operator. The big chains are crowding them out. There's this big all-under-one-roof thing they're all tending to. The department stores and the supermarkets and the cigar stores are coming to look more and more alike.

Well, I had a lot of loot by now. There was plenty more I could've taken, and wanted to take, but I knew a guy could get too greedy, could keep on grabbing left and right till he was staggering under the load. That's when he'd find someone grabbing him. So I made up my mind right here to quit while I was ahead.

I got ready to go. Then I froze.

I heard the night watchman. He was muttering to himself, sounded like. I crept to the escalator well and looked down. And I saw he wasn't muttering to himself.

I hadn't counted on there being a dog, especially one this big and this mean looking. The dog knew I was in the store, all right. The watchman was having a time holding back. They were starting up.

I looked all around and knew there was no getting by them. I had to find a quiet way to quiet them. I didn't want them to raise the alarm. I thought fast. The sporting goods department. I padded that way.

The suitcases were really weighing me down, but the excitement was pouring on the speed as well as the sweat. I pushed the suitcases behind this counter. Then I found what I was looking for—steel traps.

I set them out, all around—almost stepped in one myself. It was dim in here, but I springled some of this green sawdust from the woodsy display over them to make them harder to see. Then I hid and waited.

The dog was first, straining ahead, the man trying to hold on to him and keep him quiet. The traps got them both.

The traps were good merchandise; they held. Pull only increased the tension. The watchman carried just a billy and he dropped that when the trap sprang on him. Before he could forget his shock and pain and start to free himself, I swept up the billy and gave it to him on the head, hard.

I turned just in time. The dog was coming at me with his jaws and his three good legs. He was harder to deal with, even with the drag of the trap and the pain he must have been feeling. He had me dancing, I can tell you. But I finally beat him down. I finished him off, like you're supposed to do with animals that break their legs.

Now I was ready to go. I retrieved the suitcases and made my way down to the ground floor. I looked out the side door and stopped dead in my tracks.

Down the street I saw police cars. Figures were moving, hugging the buildings, closing in. Either the damn night watchman had given the alarm before he came after me or some how I had set it off myself. If I only had a gun.

I was on the point of hightailing it back up to the sporting goods department. I could do a lot of standing off with all the weapons and ammo there. I could do a lot of picking off with a repeating rifle and a scope. Maybe I could even break through, if I could get hold of a hostage. If only I could get a gun. But then I heard whispers and saw shadows creeping on all sides of me and I knew it was all up.

I realized cops had come in by different entrances, had boxed me in. What else could I do but drop the loot, raise my hands, put on a smile, and wait? Wait, and think if I had only got a gun.

Hold it.

Thanks, officer. This is what I've been waiting for, the minute you'd get a little careless and turn your butt. That's why I've been such a good boy and cooperated, why I've been re-enacting this whole thing in such detail.

The big difference is—this time I've *got* a gun.

Next Month:

THE ABRAXAS AFFAIR

A New Exciting Novelet

by JERRY JACOBSON

TWIST OF THE KNIFE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

They'd killed my friend, framed my girl. But they'd overlooked one sticky little factor — me!

THE PLACE WAS all glass and chrome and mini-skirted secretaries, and I felt ill at ease the minute I walked through the door. It was a far cry from my little two-room office upstate, but then there was quite a difference between *Universal Detective Agency, Inc.*, and plain old *Al Darlan Investigations.*

You're Mr. Darlan?" one of the sweet young things asked.

"That's right. I have an appointment with Jonas Cutler."

"This way, please. He's expecting you."

Jonas Cutler's office occupied a floor space big enough for about five of mine. Its glass walls looked out on a Manhattan skyline that was quite different from the dying elm tree that was my main scenic wonder. The desk was of polished oak, with tapered edges and black metal legs, probably worth a cool five hundred bucks.

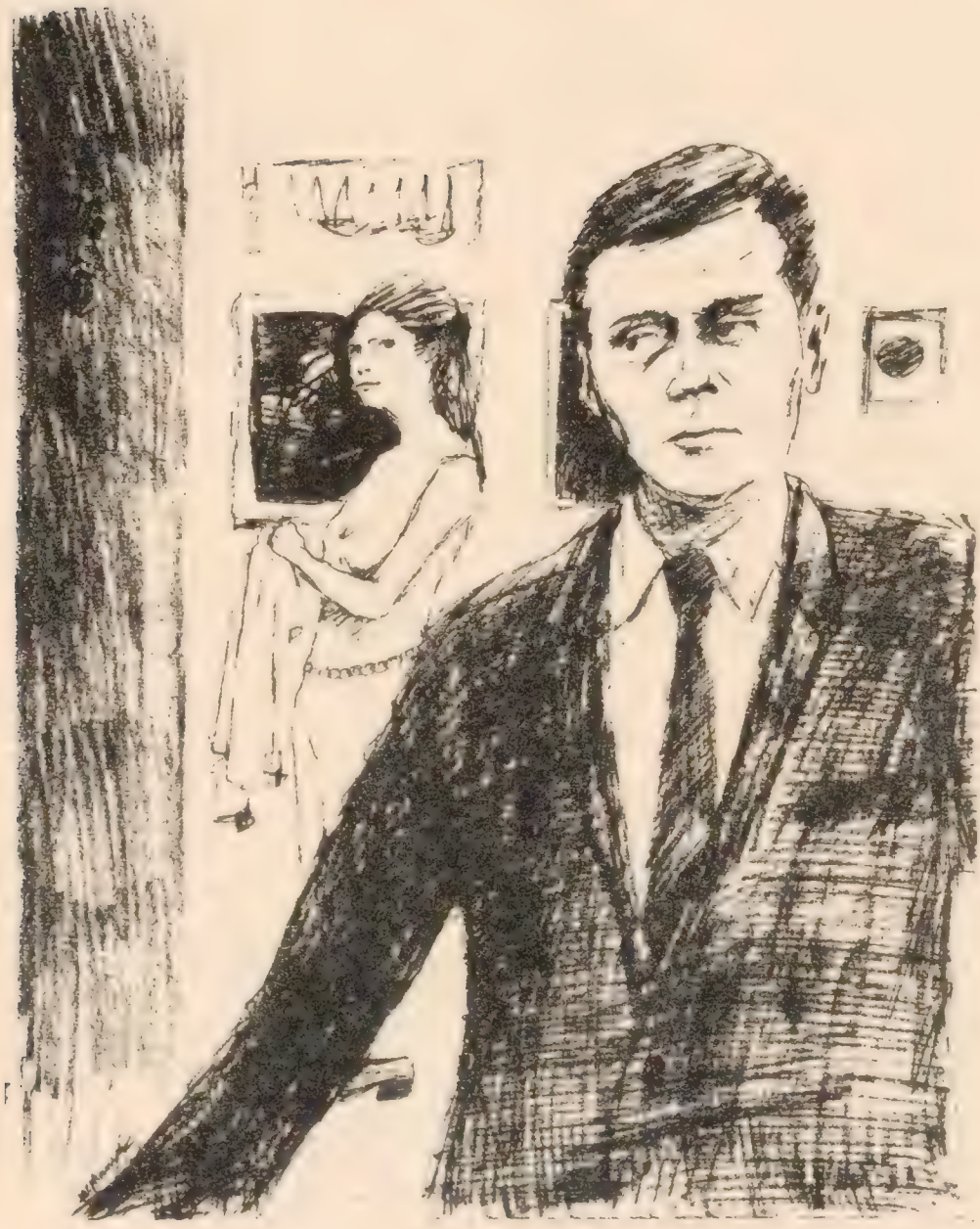
I was willing to bet not one of the dozen or so drawers held so much as a fifth of whiskey.

No, Jonas Cutler was the new breed, the private eye as businessman. There'd be a computer in the next office somewhere, printing out assignments for his staff of three hundred, recording man-hours, even typing up the client invoices at the end of the month.

I looked at him and decided he probably had a heart of stainless steel.

Featuring

AL DARLAN



"Won't you sit down, Mr. Darlan?"

"Thanks, I will."

He was younger than me, which bugged me right away, making me think of a beautiful wife waiting for him in some suburban bed, and Saturday afternoons on the golf course. Maybe thirty-five, tanned well for this early in the spring—and that meant a Florida vacation, in all likelihood. Blue eyes, just a bit of fashionable gray to his sideburns; wide tie and fashionable suit, coat cut too tightly to conceal a shoulder holster. But then, men like Jonas Cutler didn't carry guns.

"I'll come right to the point."

I looked him in his blue eyes. "I wish you would. It's a two-hour drive back home."

"Well, I hope you realize we didn't invite you down here just to waste your time. The truth is, Mr. Darlan, Universal Detective is planning to expand into the upstate area. We already have offices in fourteen cities across the country, as well as in London, and we think the time has come to cover upstate New York a little more thoroughly. Actually, we've been getting a good many cases from your area lately."

"I guess that's why my business has been slow."

"Ah—yes. Well, in any event, we're planning an agency in your city, Mr. Darlan. The thought came to us that rather than establish a whole new operation, with new people unfamiliar with the area, the smart thing might be to buy out an established operation. You've been in business there for—how long?

"Call it close to fifteen years."

"Yes, fifteen years. Well, Mr. Darlan, we are prepared to purchase your entire operation, including office staff, records, physical assets, and so forth. You would remain on as our manager, at a salary of—"

"There is no office staff, and the physical assets are damn few."

"Well—" He seemed a bit flustered now. "Surely you must have a secretary."

"Girl down the hall does my typing for me. She has a beauty parlor, but things are usually slow with her the beginning of the week."

"Well, no matter. We could always hire a staff. We are prepared to offer you a very handsome sum."

I was just wasting time, his and mine both. "My agency is not for sale, Mr. Cutler. I don't make much money at it, but at least I'm my own boss. Up where I come from, they wouldn't know what to make of an operation like yours. All this efficiency would scare away my clients."

"At least listen to our offer, Mr. Darlan. Forty thousand dollars cash, plus an employment contract guaranteeing you a minimum of fifteen thousand a year for the next five years. That's a total of $115,000, and it could go higher if the volume of business warrants."

It was a lot of money, a hell of a lot of money. I hated to turn it down.

"Sorry, Mr. Cutler. I'm not cut out to be an office manager."

"At least think it over. One way or another, we're coming upstate. You might as well come in with us, or you'll simply be out of business within a year."

"We'll see."

"Think about it."

"I will," I promised, but I didn't bother to shake his hand as I left.

Sylvia Shaw was just finishing with a customer as I poked my head around the door of the beauty parlor.

"Be with you in a minute, Al," she said.

I waited for her, thumbing through an old issue of *Modern Beauty Shop*. After a few minutes the customer left and Sylvia came in to join me on the couch. "How was New York?"

"Terrible. They want to buy me out."

"Well?" She was a hard, practical woman, twice divorced and very wise to the ways of the world. Her blonde hair was a little too bleached, and the lines around her mouth were beginning to show through the makeup, but I still liked her. Occasionally she did my typing and answered the phone. More often, we just talked, like now.

"I told them no, damn it! I know it's a lot of money, Syl, but I just couldn't see it. Working for Universal Detective Agency, sending in reports, keeping an expense account for somebody's approval—those are things for younger men. I'm too old and grouchy to go to work for other people now."

"Sure, you're ancient." She cuffed me playfully on the jaw, then turned serious. "Did you happen to look into Gasted's office when you got off the elevator?"

Gasted was an accountant and tax consultant who worked out of a little one-room office on our floor.

"No, should I have?"

"There was a terrible racket from that direction while I was doing my customer. I couldn't leave her, and then it quieted down. Sounded like he was breaking up the furniture."

I sighed and got to my feet. "I'll take a look. You'd think I was the damned landlord the way I watch over this place sometimes."

My own office was at the far end of the hall. I went down there first and checked the mail that had arrived during my day in New York. Then I poured a couple of shots of good bourbon into paper cups and took them down to Sylvia's place.

"Start on this awhile," I told her. "I'll go check on Gasted."

"You know I need ice cubes, Al,"

I ignored her and went down the hall to Bill Gasted's door. It was directly opposite the elevator, and I hadn't heard any sound from it

when I got off. Now I tried the door and pushed it open. Gasted was sprawled on the floor, half behind the desk. He was alive, and just beginning to regain consciousness.

I drew my gun, glancing around the tiny office for evidence of an intruder. It was much like my own, but without the luxury of a separate waiting room. An old desk, chairs, the blotchy green filing cabinet, a water cooler and a coat rack, the artifacts of one man's career.

There was no place his assailant could be hiding, so I holstered my gun and knelt beside him. "What happened Bill?" There was a bruise and swelling on his forehead, but otherwise he seemed uninjured. He was younger than me, about thirty-five, with a ready smile and cheerful friendliness, but my contact with him till now had been limited to chats in the elevator or the men's room at the end of the hall.

"I was out of the office for a minute and when I came back he was going through my files," Gasted said. "We fought and he hit me with a blackjack. Before I passed out I managed to stab him in the shoulder with a letter opener."

I glanced around, noting for the first time the tiny specks of blood on the floor. "You don't know where he went?"

Bill Gasted shook his head. "He hit me again and I went down hard."

Sylvia appeared in the doorway with her paper cup of bourbon. "I got tired of drinking alone. What are you two up to, anyway?" Then she saw the bruise on his forehead and rushed forward. "My God! What happened to you?"

"He had a burglar," I said. "Get a cold cloth or something for his head."

She was back in a minute, ministering to him in her best motherly quality. I checked for more bloodstains in the hall and then pushed the button for the elevator, waiting patiently while old Oscar brought it up from his basement niche. The building wasn't big enough, or modern enough, for self-service elevators, so we were always at the mercy of Oscar unless we chose to walk down four flights.

"Going out again so soon, Mr. Darlan?" he asked me, wrinkling his crusty, weatherbeaten face.

"Not quite yet, Oscar. I want to know if you took anyone down a few minutes ago, just before or just after I came up."

"No sir, Mr. Darlan. I been down in the basement eating a late lunch. You were the only customer I had in the past half hour or so. Nobody came down."

"Thanks, Oscar." I left him and pushed open the door to the fire stairs. On the top step there was a dried drop of blood.

"I'm sorry I didn't kill him," Gasted said, still nursing his head.

I grunted and walked to the

phone. "We'd better call the police."

Gasted took the cold cloth away from his head. "Wait a minute. Sylvia, would you mind if I spoke to Darlan alone?"

She shrugged and picked up her paper cup. "I know when I'm not wanted."

When she'd left them alone, Bill Gasted said, "There's something I have to tell you."

"That you knew the man you fought with?"

He was properly amazed. "How in hell did you know that?"

"It was no great deduction. An ordinary office burglar wouldn't be going through your files, but a former client might. Who'd you make angry?"

He held the damp cloth against his forehead once more. "It's a long story, but you're mostly right. The guy that slugged me was Harry Trenton."

I gave a low whistle. "Harry Trenton, the real estate wizard?"

"That's the one."

"He carries a blackjack?"

Gasted nodded his pained head. "The man's little more than a gangster, really. He got lucky in real estate and built up Trenton Enterprises into a multi-million-dollar corporation, but he still goes in for the strong-arm stuff. He has a wife and a mistress and even a crew of armed guards at his offices."

"What's your connection with him?"

"He came to me last fall with a tax problem involving his subsidiary home building company."

"Trenton Enterprises has no tax experts on its staff? I don't mean to run you down, Bill, but this business of yours isn't exactly a ball of fire."

Gasted snorted. "For Harry Trenton I was just perfect. He wanted some dirty work with the books and it couldn't be handled by any of his regular people. I was small, virtually unknown by the IRS, and safe from his standpoint. Only after I did the work for him, he argued about the price. I decided to protect myself by keeping certain documents in my files. That's what he came after today."

"What sort of documents?"

"Tax records, mostly. Enough to prove income tax evasion if I showed them to the right people."

"Did he get away with them?"

Gasted stepped to the open file

drawer and nodded. "He got them, and I want you to get them back for me, Darlan. Or else get the money he owes me. After this scene today, I want plenty."

"You're hiring me?"

"I'm hiring you."

"I'm a private detective, not a strong-arm man."

"Find Harry Trenton. Talk to him. My God, if I go to see him myself, one of us will end up dead!"

It was an awkward position for me. I didn't want the job, but there was no easy way of refusing him.

"All right," I said finally. "But I'll have to charge you my usual rates."

"Sure. It's worth it to me."

I nodded. "Take care of that head. I'll go look for Harry Trenton."

"And bring back my letter opener," Gasted called after me. "It's probably still sticking in his shoulder."

FINDING HARRY TRENTON late on a June afternoon, with the sun still high for golf or sailing, would ordinarily have been a chancy assignment. But with a knife wound in his shoulder, I figured he wouldn't go too far without treatment. Hospital emergency wards always asked questions, and his wife at home might ask them too. I guessed that my best bet was to try first at the sprawling suburban offices of Trenton Enterprises.

I parked my car beneath a sickly elm tree and headed across the newmown grass to the building's main entrance. It was nearly six o'clock, and the employees' parking lot was all but deserted.

Inside the front door, a night guard sat on a stool, reading a newspaper and keeping watch over the visitors' book.

"You got business here?" he asked me. "We're closed, you know."

"I'm looking for Harry Trenton. I thought he might be working late."

"He left long ago. He never works this late." The guard patted the leather of his holster and I took the hint. No more questions here.

I went back to the car and tried to decide what to do next. There was a warehouse around the back of the building, apparently holding building supplies for the home construction end of Trenton Enterprises.

I was looking toward this structure when I noticed the Caddy with an HTT license plate on its rear, parked almost out of sight around the corner of the building. Harry T. Trenton.

I strolled over and glanced casually into the car. There were bloodstains on the white leather upholstery of the right-hand bucket seat.

Moving quickly, I ran around the back of the office building, heading

for the rear door. It was unlocked, and I only hoped I wasn't setting off any invisible alarm system.

Inside, I moved down the sterile corridors of the low building, seeking some direction to the president's office. The gentle hum of the air conditioning was the only sound that reached me.

Finally I reached the executive office aera, where tinted windows dimmed the interior light. I found the door with Trenton's name and pushed it open. The polished oak door to his inner office was standing wide. and I could see him sprawled on the rug in the center of the room. Bill Gasted's letter opener was in him, all right, but not in the shoulder. It was sticking out of his chest, pointed at the ceiling.

I knelt beside the body and felt for a pulse that wasn't there. That was when the voice behind me barked, "Freeze, mister! Move your hands and you're a dead man!"

I turned my head slowly and saw the night guard with his revolver out. There'd been an alarm on the back door after all.

"Trenton's been murdered," I told him.

"I can see that. And it looks like I'm just in time to catch his murderer!"

It wasn't the first night of my life I'd spent in a jail cell, but it was one of the most frustrating. By the time I'd answered—or declined to answer—a mass of questions from five different detectives, it was too late to find a single judge who'd shoulder the responsibility of releasing me, with or without bail. Since I could hardly tell the full story and implicate my client, I settled down for a long, uncomfortable night in a cell.

By morning my back had developed a dull ache and my mouth felt like it was full of fur. Worst of all, Jonas Cutler of Universal Detective was waiting to visit me.

I walked into the little visitors' room and glared at him as I sat down. I was all too aware of my unshaven, u n k e p t appearance. "How'd you hear about it so fast?" I asked him.

He fastened his superior blue eyes on me. "Trenton was an important man. It made the late news broadcasts last night in New York. I got up at dawn to drive here."

"Mighty nice of you. Sorry I didn't have time to shave."

"That's all right," he said, missing the sarcasm. "What's the situation? Do you need a lawyer?"

"I just need to get the hell out of here."

"Who killed him, assuming you didn't?"

I sighed and looked away. "A client of mine is involved. I can't talk about it."

"That's always messy, unless the client is willing to tell what he knows. It's not good for business having clients arrested." He got out his notebook and started to write, all

New York efficiency. "What about the time element? How long was he dead when you found him?"

"Not long. I'd say fifteen or twenty minutes from the looks of him, but it's hard to tell if the knife killed him instantly, until we hear the autopsy results."

Cutler glanced up, gold-filled pencil poised. "Client's name?"

"Look, how does it concern you?"

"Yesterday's offer still stands, Darlan, despite your present—difficulties. Maybe if we get you out of this spot you'll realize how much Universal Detective has to offer you."

"I can get myself out of any spot I get into."

"Look, Darlan," he said with a sigh. I noticed the *Mister* of yesterday was gone now. "I'll be quite blunt about it. You're getting old for this business. It's a young man's game."

"I can still handle my share."

"Sure you can! But you need the sort of organization we can supply. You need men to do the legwork, to handle the nasty bits of business. I don't go out looking for bodies, and you shouldn't, either."

I sighed again and scratched at my day's growth of beard. "Let me handle it. They can't hold me beyond this morning without charging me, and I hardly think they can make a murder charge stick. They're just upset because I wouldn't tell them anything. With luck I'll be out of here by noon."

And I was. I walked quickly down the steps of the courthouse at five minutes after eleven, breathing in the free air and feeling good. I carefully averted my gaze from the big blue car with New York plates that waited at the curb, and headed for my own car. I didn't want any more conversation with Jonas Cutler, not just now.

I went back to my office, knowing he'd turn up sooner or later, but hoping I could get a few things done first. I didn't want to be dependent on his agency in any way, and that meant I had to wind up my affairs with Bill Gasted as quickly as possible. But when I reached my floor, Gasted's door was locked.

Sylvia Shaw was in her beauty parlor, talking on the phone. I signaled her to come in when she was finished, and went down the hall to my office. After a night in jail everything about it was depressing. I stared at the wooden floor and the dirty windows, and then started opening the morning's collection of bills and correspondence school advertisements. After a while Sylvia came in, looking unhappy.

"A man named Cutler was here asking questions," she told me. "Is he the one trying to buy your business?"

"He's the one. Did he see Gasted?"

"I think so. Bill left shortly after he did."

"Damn!"

"What is it, Al? Did Bill kill Harry Trenton? Are you protecting him?"

"I wish to hell I knew. If he killed Trenton, the guy had to walk down four flights of stairs and drive five miles to his office with a letter opener in his chest. It could be, but I doubt it."

"Then somebody was waiting for him back at his office?"

"I just don't know, Syl. I guess if I can't find Gasted I'd better drive out and talk to Trenton's widow."

"Always suspect the widow."

I grinned. "Sure. Why not?" I had another thought. "How long before I came yesterday did you hear the sound of the struggle in Bill's office?"

"Let's see. I was just starting to comb out my customer's hair. It couldn't have been more than five minutes or so."

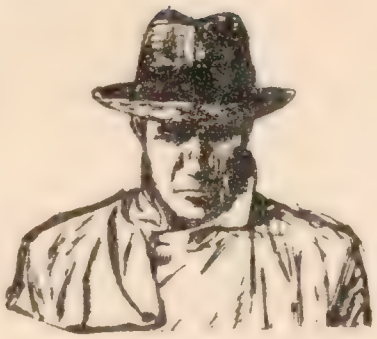
"So I must have just missed Trenton, if Gasted is telling the truth."

"How could he have lied?"

I thought about that. "He might have killed Trenton earlier at his office and then made up the whole story about the fight. I doubt it, though. There was blood on the front seat of Trenton's car, indicating he was wounded at Gasted's office just as Bill said."

"Then who killed him?"

"I don't know yet." I glanced



at my watch and saw that it was nearly noon. "They should have the autopsy report by now. That might help answer one question."

I phoned a detective named Burke who was a friend from way back. He chuckled when he heard my voice. "I hear you got picked up last night. Still fooling around with corpses, aren't you?"

"Not through choice. I just happened to be there. Look, Burke, is the autopsy report on Trenton in yet?"

"Let me check." He was gone from the phone for a full minute, but when he returned he said, "Right here in front of me."

"How long could he have lived with the chest wound? Did it kill him instantly?"

Burke read through the report and then answered. "No, there was apparently a lot of internal bleeding. He also had a flesh wound in the shoulder, apparently from the same weapon."

"I know about that. Could he have walked far with that chest wound?"

"I doubt it like hell, but you never know. The doc estimates he might have lived fifteen or twenty minutes at most."

"Thanks, Burke."

"Watch yourself, Darlan. They're still after your tail on this."

"I'll be careful."

I hung up and faced Sylvia once more.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"Just that Trenton could have been stabbed here and still made it to his office before he died. It's unlikely, though."

"You still think Bill lied to you?"

"I've had clients lie before."

"But if he knew Trenton was dead or dying, why hire you to get back those papers?"

My eyes shot up. "He told you about the papers?"

"Well—yes, after we'd heard about Trenton. He told me this morning."

"And you told Cutler when he came snooping around?"

"Not really, Al. I just said Bill was your client."

I cursed her silently, but only sighed aloud. "All right. I'm going out to Trenton's house. If Gasted comes back, keep him under wraps till I can talk to him. Whatever you do, don't let Cutler get to him again."

"All right, Al," she said, a bit contritely. "Be careful."

Harry Trenton's home was one of a group of lakefront houses that Trenton Enterprises had built five years earlier. It sat on a bluff overlooking the water, a pink stucco palace better suited to California than upstate New York. I figured it for $75,000 easy, and I might have been on the low side.

No one answered my ring, but there was a blue cad in the driveway that looked as if it might be a mate to Trenton's own, especially with an MOT license plate on it. I remembered reading somewhere that his wife's name was Myra.

I walked around to the rear of the house, looking for another way in, and finally I stood on the bluff overlooking the lake. I could see a woman down in the water, walking through the shallow surf near the shoreline. There was a path leading down to the water's edge and I took it.

She stopped walking and stared at me as I reached the beach in front of her. She was a striking woman of indeterminate middle age, and she wore a flowered print dress. Her legs were bare and still worth looking at. She carried a pair of sandals in one hand, and seemed oblivious to the foamy water lapping at her knees and the bottom of her dress.

"This is a private beach," she said, coming a bit nearer to shore. "What do you want?"

"You're Mrs. Trenton? Myra Trenton?"

"Another detective? More questions?"

"I'm not with the police, Mrs. Trenton. I was hired by a business associate of your husband's." I was beginning to feel foolish standing there while she splashed in the surf. "Is there some place we could talk?"

"No place but here. I enjoy the water. With Harry gone I might not be able to keep this place much longer."

I thought she'd been drinking, but I couldn't be sure. "I'm sorry about your husband."

"So am I." She brushed an unkempt blonde hair from her forehead. Her hair was beginning to go to gray at the roots, as if the latest dye job was wearing off. "It's not every day your husband gets himself murdered."

"Harry Trenton made a lot of enemies, didn't he?"

"Any successful man does."

"People threatened him. He carried a blackjack for protection."

"That was just a joke."

"Not to the people he hit with it."

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"About his enemies. About who might have wanted to kill him."

"The wife is the wrong one to ask about that. You should talk to Gloria Forest. She was his mistress for the past three years. She saw more of him, more often, than I did."

"Gloria Forest. All right, I'll look her up. But you must know something. Did he ever mention a man named Bill Gasted to you?"

"I told you, I was only his wife." She came in out of the water now, the sand sticking to her wet feet. "He gave me this house, and now maybe I'm going to lose it. He owed a lot of money."

"The house means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

"More than Harry ever did," she said.

I CALLED BACK to Sylvia's place, but she told me there was still no sign of Bill Gasted. I was beginning to get worried, wondering where he'd gotten to and what Jonas Cutler might be doing about now. The case had too many angles as it was, without Cutler coming in to muddy the waters. If I could ever find Gasted I thought maybe I'd just resign from it.

There was only one Gloria Forest in the phone book, and I was pretty certain from the address of her fancy apartment that she was the one I wanted.

I spoke to her through the downstairs intercom, identifying myself, and she pushed the buzzer to let me in.

Upstairs I found her wrapped in towels that covered her head and most of her face. From what little I could see, I had the impression of a young, attractive, somewhat hard-boiled gal.

"Don't mind me," she said. "It's a beauty treatment for my face. I

do it every day. Now what did you want?"

I glanced around the apartment, taking in the original oil paintings and the expensive carpeting. It looked like the sort of place Harry Trenton could have relaxed in.

"I have to ask you some questions about Mr. Trenton," I said. "You were a friend of his?"

She shrugged and held the towels a little tighter to her face. "Off and on."

"I understood you were his mistress for the past three years."

"Who told you that? Myra Trenton?"

"Yes." There was no point denying it.

"So? She couldn't satisfy him and I could. It's as simple as that. No point in my denying it. I come in for a share of his company in the will. Maybe even a bigger share than Myra."

"That would give both of you a motive for wanting him dead."

She laughed at that. "Half the people who knew Harry Trenton wanted him dead. He spent half his life paying off people to get him out of scrapes."

"He carried a blackjack."

"And he used it. Want to see my bruises?"

I couldn't decide if she was kidding. Maybe that's why she was hiding her head. I was convinced it wasn't a beauty treatment. "Did you see him yesterday?"

"No. Not since the weekend. He was busy—too busy to be with me."

"Did you ever go to his office with him?"

"Sure. Lots of times."

"How did he get in, without passing the guard in front?"

"There's a back door that's unlocked."

"It has an alarm."

"You can bypass the alarm with a key. He had a key. It's kept open for deliveries and things."

"At night? Just what sort of business is Trenton Enterprises?"

She shrugged. "You expect me to know?"

"I do, if you're going to be part owner of it."

"Real estate, home building. That sort of thing."

"He needed armed guards for real estate?"

"Don't ask me. That's all I know."

"All right," I said with a sigh. "How about a man named Bill Gasted? Ever hear of him?"

"No."

I was at a dead end. "Well, thanks for your help, anyway."

"Will you find the man who killed him?"

"I will. The man. Or the woman."

As I went out I flipped off the lock on her door. Then I waited a moment and reopened it. She'd removed the towels from her head and was standing in the center of the room, staring at the door. She froze when she saw me, something

like terror on her attractive face.

"What do you want now?"

"I forgot my hat."

"You weren't wearing one."

"Oh. Well, good-bye again."

This time I left for good. Gloria Forest was a very pretty young lady with dark brown hair teased up in the latest accepted style. Her face and head were unmarked, unbruised. Whatever the purpose of the towels, it hadn't been to hide an injury.

I went back to my office and sat there brooding about it. Harry Trenton had lots of women and lots of enemies and he was dead. That was about all I knew. Maybe Gasted had killed him. Maybe I was ignoring the simplest solution of all. Gasted had killed him, and now he was halfway to South America while I was left holding the bag.

The phone rang and I picked it up. The voice was a familiar one, Jonas Cutler. "Darlan, if you want to take a ride out to Trenton Enterprises, you might find it interesting. I've solved your case for you."

"Oh?" I couldn't keep the chill out of my voice. "Well, that's just great. I'll be out." Then I added, "You wouldn't also happen to know where Bill Gasted is, would you?"

"We've got it all wrapped up."

"I'm on my way."

I hung up and just sat there, staring at the telephone. Maybe I was getting old. Maybe Cutler was right.

As I passed Sylvia's door I poked my head in. She had a customer in the chair. "You on your way out again, Al?"

"For a while." I glanced at my watch and saw that it was already after five. "How late you working tonight? I may want to come back and get loaded."

"One of my customers just called for an emergency appointment at seven. I'll have to stay till then, but afterwards I'm all yours."

The woman in the chair twisted her head for a look at me, but I ignored her.

"See you then," I said.

I drove out to Trenton Enterprises, pretty much ignoring the evening traffic, and parked beneath the same tree. Something had been bothering me during the drive—something besides Jonas Cutler and Universal Detective—but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Something about Sylvia.

Cutler and Gasted were waiting for me at the back door, as friendly as a couple of fraternity brothers.

"I want to thank you, Al," Gasted greeted me. "You and Jonas here have really straightened this case out. God, when I heard that Trenton was dead I pictured myself on the way to a prison cell for life."

"You've solved it?" I asked Cutler. He was looking very much like the young Manhattan executive, and in that instant I think I really hated him. *Al Darlan Investigations*

might go under, but it would never become the upstate office of *Universal Detective Agency*.

"With Gasted's help. You see, he told me what Harry Trenton was up to here. Come on, I'll show you!"

They led me down the familiar corridor, but this time we turned right instead of left. We weren't headed toward the executive offices but the other way, toward the warehouse around the back.

"What about the police?" I asked.

"I'm working very closely with them," Cutler said. "The days when a private detective was something of a lone wolf, withholding evidence and getting himself beaten up in alleys, are gone—if they ever really existed outside of fiction."

I grunted and said, "They even shut off the alarm at the back door for you."

"Not only that, they furnished me with the ultimate clue, the clue that tells me who killed Harry Trenton."

"And what would that be?"

"I'll get to it in a moment. First I want to show you what we have here." He threw open the double steel doors that connected the Trenton office complex with the warehouse and led the way through narrow aisles crowded with shipping cartons.

"Complete layouts for equipping off-track betting parlors and other gambling layouts. They've got off-track betting in New York City already, and it's only a matter of time before it spreads to the upstate cities. With his political connections, Harry Trenton was purchasing likely real estate for possible use of off-track betting parlors. It was this side interest that led him to Gasted, because he didn't want these land purchases to show up in the records of Trenton Enterprises.

"The documents Gasted held out were surveys showing the best locations for betting parlors— close to factories and industrial parks, suburban shopping centers, high density areas. When Trenton found Bill out of his office, he tried to get back the survey and that's when Bill found him. They fought, Bill stabbed him in the shoulder with a letter opener, and then . . ."

I looked over the stacks of packaged betting pads, the electronic tote boards, the ticket vending machines, the bits and pieces of Harry Trenton's dream of empire. "And then?"

Jonas Cutler took a plastic evidence bag from his pocket. "I borrowed this from the police. Had to practically sign my life away to get it."

The bag held a single shocking pink Kleenex, crushed into a ball.

"So?"

"We think it was used to wipe the hilt of the letter opener clean of prints. It's an odd color, the color your friend Sylvia Shaw uses in her beauty parlor."

"Just what are you trying to say, Cutler?"

"Sylvia Shaw walked into that office and saw her friend Gasted unconscious on the floor. Maybe she even thought he was dead. And there was Trenton with a shoulder wound. Call it revenge, or self-defense or whatever you will Sylvia grabbed that letter opener and stabbed him in the chest. He managed to get down to his car and back out here before he died. Sylvia did it, Darlan. There's no getting around it."

My lips were dry. "Just what do you intend doing about it?"

"I'm meeting the police there at seven. They plan to hold her for questioning."

I looked at my watch. "It's almost seven now. I think she's working late."

Then suddenly I broke away from them and I was running. Sylvia had a late appointment, an emergency customer. I remembered it all now, and maybe I wouldn't be too late.

"Darlan! Where in hell are you?" It was Gasted's voice.

"He's trying to warn her," Cutler said. "The damn fool!"

I drove as if the car had wings, and before I reached the office there were two screeching police cars on my tail. There was no waiting for old Oscar's elevator, no waiting for anything.

I took the stairs two at a time and was left panting and near collapse after four flights. There was a light coming from beneath her door, and I prayed I wasn't too late.

Sylvia was standing in the center of the room, her dress torn and her face a mess of scratches. She looked up as I entered, and then down at the sobbing girl crumpled at her feet. "The damnedest thing, Al! One of my best customers and she tries to kill me!"

The girl on the floor was Trenton's mistress, Gloria Forest.

My heart was still beating too fast an hour later, as I sat behind my desk and told them all how it was. The police had taken Gloria away, but they still had questions. So did Gasted and Cutler. And Sylvia.

"It couldn't have been Sylvia," I said, speaking to them all but directing my remarks especially to Jonas Cutler. "She never left the building. You could hardly believe that Trenton drove back to his office still clutching a Kleenex and wiped the prints from the knife in his chest before he died.

"Besides, I saw his car yesterday. There was blood in the front seat, but on the right-hand side the passenger's side. Someone drove Cutler from this building to his office, and it was reasonable to assume that the same person administered the final *coup de grace*, the twist of the knife that killed him."

"Why?" Cutler asked. "Why was it reasonable to assume that?" He

was going to challenge me on every point.

"Because the person brought the letter opener along. Certainly Trenton wouldn't have left it still in his shoulder. And if he had, the wound wouldn't have bled so much on the front seat of his car. No, someone encountered Trenton at this building, took the letter opener along for later use, drove him to his office, and finished the job there. Now I asked myself who this person could be.

"Well, it couldn't be Gasted or Sylvia, so I started looking around for others. The use of that Kleenex to wipe the hilt points to a connection with Sylvia's beauty parlor, but I was already thinking of such a connection anyway."

"You knew the killer was Sylvia's customer? That's impossible!" Cutler snorted and turned away in his chair. He was having none of it.

"Not so impossible. Oscar, the elevator man, told me he took no one down this floor. That told me Trenton used the stairs, but it told me something else besides. There was one other person on our floor when the fight took place in Bill's tax office. By Sylvia's own testimony, she couldn't go see what the trouble was because she had a customer.

"Later she said she was combing out the customer's hair, and I myself saw this customer when I poked my head in the office. Now I ask you, if Oscar took no one down in his elevator, what happened to Sylvia's customer?"

"She went down the stairs," Bill Gasted answered.

"Of course she went down the stairs! And are we to believe a girl fresh from the beauty parlor would walk down four flights of stairs rather than wait for the elevator? And at the same time that Harry Trenton, bleeding from a shoulder wound, went down those same stairs? If she did—and we know she had to—it was because she was with Trenton, helping him down those steps.

"That, by the way, also explains what Trenton was doing on this floor, in Bill's office, in the first place. He'd come to pick up this girl at the beauty parlor. When he saw Bill's office was empty—or more likely when he saw him walking down the hall—he went after those files."

"Maybe the elevator man lied?" Cutler suggested, fighting it to the end.

"Why lie unless he was the killer himself? And we know he wasn't, because like Sylvia and Bill he couldn't have left the building to drive Trenton to the office. So we have Sylvia's girl customer helping Trenton to his car, driving him to the office, helping him inside past the alarm system and then killing him with the letter opener she'd carefully brought along. Who would have his confidence enough for this? Who would have such a spur-

of-the-moment motive for finishing the job when she saw the blood? Who would he be picking up from the beauty parlor? Certainly only his wife, or his mistress. One or the other."

"Why not his wife, then?" Sylvia asked.

"Three reasons. One, she would be Mrs. Trenton to you, and you would have immediately connected her with Harry's killing which you didn't do. Second. I saw both of them. Harry's wife's hair was a mess, while Gloria's was neatly teased. Mrs. Trenton hadn't just come from the beauty parlor yesterday. And third, Gloria tried to hide her face with towels while I questioned her. She was afraid I'd remember her from those few seconds at Sylvia's, when I poked my head in.

"But I didn't recognize or remember her, and then she figured she was safe—except for Sylvia. If Sylvia ever found out she'd been Trenton's mistress, she might put two and two together and come up with a murderess. So Gloria called for an emergency appointment tonight and tried to shut you up."

"Damn near succeeded, too," Sylvia said, touching her face and neck.

"She did it all for a share in Trenton's business?" Bill asked.

"Murders have been done for far less. She saw the blood and the knife and decided to finish the job."

Jonas Cutler had risen quietly to his feet. Now he said, moving toward the door, "I guess you won't be needing me here after all, Darlan. But if you ever change your mind—"

"I'll let you know," I completed for him. I waited till he'd closed the door and then got out the bourbon.

COMING SOON—NEW STORIES BY

Jeffrey M. Wallman
Jack Foxx
Matthew Miner
Bill Pronzini
William Jeffrey
Clayton Matthews

THE EARLY RETIREMENT

by MARGARET E. BROWN

Run, little man. Run as far as you can. And seek that perfect hiding place for safety. But remember. Some fine day we'll find you. Then—you die . . .

AT PRECISELY 11:38 A.M., Central Standard Time, Mario Coletti nosed his rented red Mustang into the heavy traffic of State Street and headed for O'Hare International Airport, right on schedule. On the white leather seat beside him lay a battered pigskin briefcase neatly packed with large bills—the Syndicate's monthly juicy slice of all the dirty pies which bubbled and seethed in Chicago's underworld.

As he drove, weaving in and out, expertly gearing his pace to the lights, Coletti occasionally checked the rearview mirror. Not that a tail would have bothered him at this point, but he liked to know when the cards were stacked. So far, he had followed procedure down to the tiniest detail. He was Coletti, 'the Collector', making the usual monthly pick-up—as he had two days before in Atlanta, as he was scheduled to do tomorrow in Detroit.

Tall, slump-shouldered and almost completely bald at fifty, you could look at Coletti and see the usual overweight businessman, well on his way to his second million and third coronary. His neck strained within a too-tight collar and his shirt gaped open between the buttons where his stomach bulged against and spilled over his belt.

You might dismiss him as a soft harmless man until you noticed his eyes, cold and flint gray behind steel-rimmed glasses.

Then you would remember, if you ran in the right circles, that he had earned the name 'Collector' long before the upper echelons of the Syndicate had assigned him this present position.

In those earlier, bloodier days

OF MARIO COLETTI

before the country had been carved up into so many corporate duchies and settled into its present, almost workaday routine, Mario Coletti had collected other than money for the organization. Obedience, for instance, and men's lives when they rebelled against the new order. And he still kept his hand in, as the occasional need arose.

At 12:25, still on schedule, he handed over the keys to the Mustang at the rental agency's desk in the busy terminal, then hurried over to a local airlines counter where he bought a one-way ticket to Detroit and confirmed that the next flight left at 12:45.

At 12:40, he surrendered his ticket at the gate and was checked off the list. It was encouraging to note that the flight was going to be

crowded. Later, it would be difficult to prove he hadn't been aboard. Just before boarding the plane, he snapped his fingers as if suddenly remembering something important.

"Be right back," he muttered as he pushed back through the gate.

This was his first deviation from schedule.

His experienced gray eyes canvassed the crowded terminal and still no one seemed interested in his actions.

Confidently, he crossed to the Pan Am counter and asked for a ticket to New York. As the clerk turned to check his listings, a hand fell on Coletti's shoulder.

"Thought you were going to Detroit, Collector."

He hesitated only a split second before turning to stare coldly at Lexy Larsen, one of the lesser figures who'd been present at the 'business meeting' on State Street.

"Following me, Lexy?" he asked, his voice dangerously pleasant.

"Naw!" the little man denied hastily. "Kelso's old lady's coming in from L.A. and he told me to meet her. I just got a little curious when I saw you standing here."

Coletti appeared to unbend a bit. "I checked in with home base just now and they told me to get back today. Something's come up."

At that moment, the clerk returned. "One ticket to New York, sir."

"New York?" exclaimed Larsen. "They moved home base lately?"

"Not New York," Coletti snapped to the clerk. "Newark. *Newark!*" He emphasized his Jersey accent so that the two names sounded almost identical.

"Excuse me, sir," said the nettled clerk and flounced away to get a ticket for Newark.

"Happens to me all the time," Coletti complained to Larsen; but whether or not the little man was convinced he couldn't tell for the loudspeaker announced the arrival of TWA's flight from Los Angeles and Larsen had to hustle.

"The old lady's eighty-six," he explained, "and she's liable to get on another plane if somebody don't grab her."

Coletti accepted the ticket to Newark with bad grace and cursed the day that Kelso's loony old mother'd been born. Still, he reflected, Larsen might not mention the incident to anyone immediately and by then it would be too late for the Syndicate to stop him.

Of course it meant that his false trail to Detroit had been laid down for no use, but he'd never expected it to divert them for long. And maybe a ticket for Newark would be more puzzling than one for New York. No, he'd go ahead with his plans and quickly, before Larsen passed back through the terminal.

He paused in front of a bank of lockers, withdrew the gray suitcase he had stashed there that morning upon his arrival in Chicago and carried it with him to the men's

room. Inside one of the cramped cubicles, he methodically stripped off his tight gray plaid suit and folded up the constricting shirt.

Nine months ago, he had suffered a mild heart attack and his doctor had sternly ordered him to lose weight or else. That was when he'd suddenly conceived what had to be a foolproof plan.

Paola was always telling him that he looked fatter than he was because his clothes were too tight; so when the layers of fat began to peel off, he had haunted the secondhand clothing stores, duplicating his clothes, keeping them always two sizes smaller than his body actually was. Paola had not noticed the change; perhaps she had grown as bored with their relationship as he had.

Too, he had emphasized the slump of his shoulders of late and carefully cultivated the impression of a bulging belly. Now, encased in a new well fitting brown suit and standing with his shoulders thrown back, he already looked like a different person. Not enough to pass even a cursory inspection, but getting there.

He reached into the suitcase again and unwrapped an expensive wig of thick brown human hair with medium length sideburns. Last. Coletti discarded the steel-rimmed glasses and substituted tiny contact lenses. Their green tint softened his eyes and effectively masked the flinty color.

Carefully, he re-packed the gray suitcase, hollowing out a nest for the briefcase and his wallet with all its identifying cards, and locked it. As a final touch, he sheathed the suitcase in a zippered protective case of brown plastic.

As he left the cubicle, he checked his appearance in the bank of mirrors over the wash basins. Perfect. He resisted the impulse to touch his hairpiece. He must be careful not to pick up any such betraying mannerisms.

Feeling as if the moment of truth had arrived, Coletti took a deep breath and pushed open the door. He walked out into the main hall, a tall, square-shouldered man who looked quietly prosperous and no older than forty-five. At that point he would have welcomed Larsen's presence just as a test.

He was one among many at TWA's counter, where he bought a one-way ticket to New York; and once aloft, Coletti began to relax, to allow a bright flame of triumph to blaze inside him.

Few executives ever retired from the Syndicate. He was not misled by the corporate air of legitimacy which surrounded organized crime these days. True, the old violence was mostly a thing of the past and things were generally run on a business like basis: the hours were good, the rewards substantial the higher one rose and a bright young man could advance rapidly.

But as for pension plans, forget

it. Especially for someone as near the top as he was, who knew where so many of the bodies were buried, who indeed had buried more than a few of those bodies himself.

No, the Colettis of the Syndicate don't exactly go around inquiring about retirement benefits.

All this he had accepted years before, as one can when one is young and invincible, when death is only a vague eventuality and old age something that happens to other people who somehow aren't very smart anyway.

But when the years slipped away as irrevocably as his hair, Coletti had to face the unpleasant fact that strong, courageous, intelligent or not, old age came to everyone, even to him.

The question was, what to do about it? Would he be a Gimpy Saluciano, eking out a welfare existence as shop steward of a minor Jersey union? Or like Joe Colombo, who'd had a heart attack while making a hit in upstate New York?

Certainly he didn't intend *not* to have an old age; he wouldn't repeat Carlo Murphy's mistake. Carlo'd complained once too often about his arthritis, about his fallen arches, about being too old to keep making certain rounds; and he'd wound up 'slipping' in front of a bus.

Remembering Carlo's startled yelp, the way he'd flung his arms up to shield himself from the huge green and white bus made Coletti sigh; and the stewardess, an alert child, bent over him solicitously and asked if she could bring him a pillow. He opted for scotch and soda instead.

As he sipped his drink and enjoyed the startling contrast of hard blue skies and intensely white clouds outside the vacuum sealed windows, Coletti recalled how inevitably the choices had narrowed to this solution.

He wasn't the first to attempt it. Several had the nerve and wit and opportunity to try to get out with a bundle, to run so far and so fast as to almost make it. *Almost* because the Syndicate couldn't afford too many successes without the organization's falling apart. Those who tried had to be made an example of, and Coletti became something of an expert in tracking them down.

Like a scholar working on a Ph. D. thesis, he researched their methods—how they fled, what sort of hole they were likely to bolt for, and most importantly, what had given them away.

He came to know that if a man on the run openly bought a plane ticket for Canada, it was three to one he'd gone to Mexico. Likewise, if he'd sung the praises of New York just before fleeing, he would be run to earth in San Francisco or L.A. Although once, Coletti almost overlooked the poor sap who bought a bus ticket for his

home town and actually went there.

Lifetime habits are not easily shaken off either. If a man's been spending every Saturday of the past twenty years at a racetrack, he may have the will power to lay off for a few months till the heat cools down, but eventually he'll convince himself that an occasional day at the track won't hurt. Who'll notice him among all those thousands? But word drifts around and whammo!—there's another stiff who couldn't beat the Syndicate.

Or the fugitive would be naive enough to take along his latest flame; and if there were such a thing as a glamorous woman willing to disguise her beauty and go permanently into dull hiding, Coletti had yet to meet her. That was why he had never considered asking Paola to come with him, had never let her suspect he was getting ready to run.

Paola. Tall, leggy and beautiful, with Coletti's favorite color combination: hair of midnight darkness and clear blue eyes. As far as Coletti was concerned, he would trade all the lovely blondes and redheads in the world for one well-built brunette with blue eyes. It had been a wrench when he'd first faced the fact that Paola would be one of the things he'd have to leave behind, for he'd still loved her when his planning began and blue-eyed brunettes are not easy to find.

But he had to look at the record. To his personal knowledge, only

two men had beat the Syndicate. Two men, out of all who'd tried, who had successfully vanished without even a rumor threading back that they'd been found and knocked off. Five years ago, one had abandoned a charming wife and two adoring children; two years later, the other left a very bewildered and heartbroken blonde who cried on Coletti's shoulder and swore that the man had loved her completely.

However, as the months of planning took tangible form, Coletti could look at Paola dispassionately, realize how incredibly shallow she was, see her avarice when the jewels and clothes he gave her weren't lavish enough, her petu-

lance when he was too tired to take her dancing.

"First you look like an old man, now you start acting like one," she jeered from her vantage point of youth, totally ignoring his heart condition.

Well, Paola was as he'd known her to be when he'd picked her out of a two-bit show over a year ago—young, inane, greedy for life's goodies. He didn't blame her; he *was* getting older and it was that knowledge which had put him and a bag full of the Syndicate's money on this plane today.

Overhead, the warning light blinked its command to fasten seatbelts and from a concealed speaker, the pilot informed them of their approach to Kennedy Airport.

He strode through the terminal with his stomach sucked in and his shoulders back, without bothering to check the place for stray members of the Syndicate. Who would connect a tall, well proportioned brown haired man of forty-five with a stoop-shouldered, fat, bespectacled baldy of fifty? They wouldn't even know he was missing until tomorrow when he didn't show up in Detroit.

At the taxi stand, he took the first cab in line and gave the address of an apartment house on the West Side. He was Anthony Lazzo now, with a wallet full of cards to prove it—credit cards, driver's license, Social Security card, bank statement; all issued within the past eight months.

Therein lay the success of his plan. Too many of the others had failed simply because they had prepared no place to run to and had stuck out in their new locations like Eskimos in a nudist colony.

Seven months ago, wearing his present disguise, he had rented a furnished apartment in his new name; and to account for his long absences, he had told the superintendent that he was an insurance salesman from Chicago, newly assigned to the eastern territory. It was accepted without question.

At least once a week after that, he would spend a night at his new apartment establishing his identity. He bought cold cuts at the corner delicatessen, had a drink in the bar across the street, took his new suits to the local cleaners down the block, picked up his mail, and exchanged pleasantries with the other tenants on his floor.

Old Mrs. Fairchild across the hall thought it was disgraceful that he had to do so much traveling and mothered him with homemade cookies whenever he was there; the Smiths in the front apartment greeted him cheerfully in the elevator now; and even Kathleen in the rear apartment had begun to smile at him tentatively.

Kathleen—Mrs. Morgan to him was a wild, unlooked for blessing, a gift from the gods, a shining omen of his success. A childless

widow of about thirty-seven, with a neat high-breasted figure and shoulder length black hair, there was a humorous light in her eyes which bespoke intelligence.

Of course it was her eyes which held him, eyes the color of a still sea under a deep clear sky, a hint of green overlaid with melting blue. From the moment Mrs. Fairchild introduced them in the elevator with a "Have you met our new neighbor?", Coletti ceased to regret pretty, empty-headed Paola.

After her eyes, the thing he most noticed as the elevator ascended too quickly was her clean spicy smell. Whereas Mrs. Fairchild baked twice a month, Kathleen Morgan seemed to bake twice a week; and Coletti longed for an invitation to try her spaghetti sauce. Often, as he carried up his cold cuts, the insistent aroma of garlic, olive oil and well-browned tomato paste would be hanging in the hall, enticing him.

But after six months of commonplaces as they met in the hall, elevator or lobby, no such invitation had been forthcoming; and she turned aside his gentle compliments and half-voiced suggestions of a closer friendship with a pleasant smile which promised nothing. Kathleen Morgan was no doll to be picked up at his leisure.

He liked her all the more for her ladylike reserve, however. A woman worth having should value herself. She hadn't actively discouraged him and if he went slowly. . .

There was time. Surely fifty was not too old an age to marry?

Dreaming of his new life, the Syndicate behind him, and Kathleen filling the stretches of his golden years, they had driven through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and up the West Side Drive without his noticing.

"This the place, bud?" the cabbie asked as he double-parked in front of Coletti's new home.

It was 5:28 P.M. Eastern Standard Time.

Hefting the suitcase which contained his pension, Coletti got out, paid the driver and hurried up to the apartment building. So intent was he on getting upstairs—maybe he could knock on her door and ask to borrow a cup of sugar? —that he almost collided with her as she too reached for the door of the building.

"Why Mr. Lazzo! What a surprise to see you now!" she exclaimed as he apologized and picked up her packages.

"I mean," she stammered, blushing deeply, "you usually get back to town later in the week, don't you?"

Elation blossomed inside Coletti as he realized that she at least cared enough to note his going and coming and it emboldened him.

"Today is special," he said as he ushered her into the elevator

and pressed the button for their floor.

"Oh?" Her lips curved in a smile of interest.

"Yep. I retired today. Decided I'd had enough traveling to last me a lifetime."

"But you're so young," she began and then blushed again.

That second blush destroyed his diffidence.

"Look," he said as the elevator reached their floor, "I don't want you to think I'm fresh, but today *is* special for me and I don't have a soul to help me celebrate. Won't you come in and have just one drink with me to inaugurate my new life of leisure?"

"I'm sorry, but . . ." Then she lifted her blue eyes to him and smiled. "Right, Mr. Lazzo. Give me ten minutes to put away my packages and freshen up and then I'll join you for that drink."

Excited by this second success of the day, Coletti entered his apartment and stuck the suitcase in his bedroom before going into the kitchen to check on his supply of ice cubes. As he filled an extra tray, he noticed the small bottle of pills on the sink ledge, another careful piece of his forethought.

Upon taking the apartment, he'd placed himself under the care of a doctor whose office was on the ground floor of the apartment building next door. And that reminded him: from an inner breast pocket, he removed a duplicate vial of heart medicine. Its typed label carried the last remaining evidence of his identity as Mario Coletti. Carefully, he emptied the pills into the bottle on the sink, soaked off the tiny label and rinsed it down the drain.

Now let them find him!

The doorbell rang as he carried a large tray with glasses, ice and whiskey into the living room, and he opened the door eagerly. She had taken the time to brush her dark hair and change into a simple cotton dress which matched her eyes and had large patch pockets embroidered with green leaves on the full skirt.

Now that she was here, she seemed shy and tense; so Coletti bustled about the room, mixing drinks and keeping up a steady flow of conversation to put her at ease.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you anything but scotch or bourbon, Mrs. Morgan; now that I'm going to be here I'll have to lay in more of a variety."

"Bourbon is fine," she smiled. "And if we're going to be seeing more of you, you needn't stay so formal. My name is Kathleen."

"And I'm Tony." He bowed ceremoniously and they shook hands with mock seriousness, their laughter blending easily.

He handed her a tall glass and hoisted his own.

"To a new life!" he said and added boldly, "For both of us."

"For both of us," she echoed and lifted the glass to her lips. Suddenly her hand jerked and some of the liquid splashed onto her dress. "How clumsy of me!"

"Wait," Coletti said, "I'll get a cloth.' He set his glass down on the coffee table and hurried into the kitchen.

"You must think me very awkward,' Kathleen said as he gave her the cloth. "Perhaps I'd better go now."

"Please don't," he begged. "I could never think of you as anything but graceful. You couldn't look clumsy if you tried."

She smiled at him gratefully and learned back in her chair while he retrieved his drink and sat down on the couch. If only he could draw her out, get her talking, perhaps she might stay for a second or even a third drink, at which time it would seem natural to ask her out to dinner.

"Tell me about yourself," he said. "What were you like as a child? I'll bet you were a tomboy."

"The world's most incorrigible," she laughed and launched into a long anecdote concerning an amusing childhood escapade she and her two older brothers had been involved in.

Coletti sipped his drink and only half listened as he watched the interplay of her lips and eyes. This was the first opportunity he had had to study her expressive face and his eyes devoured her, memorizing every detail. She was a bit older than he'd thought at first, probably early forties instead of late thirties. Not that he minded. Paola had cured him of young party types; Kathleen's maturity only made her more desirable.

Suddenly he realized that she had asked him a question. "Sorry," he mumbled. "What did you say?" Strange how thick his tongue felt after only one drink.

"I asked if you felt all right," she said anxiously. "You look so odd all at once."

"I-I don't know." He tried to stand and realized that his whole body was growing numb. The glass tumbled from his hand onto the floor.

"Heart condition," He gasped. "Get Dr. Stein next door."

"No, Collector," she said quietly

and reality crashed in on Coletti like a three-pound blackjack.

"But you! A woman?" he managed to get out.

She shrugged. All traces of shy hesitancy had disappeared. "You might say the Syndicate is an Equal Opportunities Employer now; no sex differentiation. Last year someone on top wondered if your zest for running down traitors was really in the interest of the organization or in the nature of practical research.

"It wasn't hard to make friends with Paola. Was her never-ending chatter one of the reasons you deserted? Of course she didn't know what she was saying, but she babbled about your being away overnight occasionally when I knew you weren't scheduled for a pick-up. It wasn't enough to take to the bosses you could have had another woman, but still it made me wonder."

"How?" he choked.

"How did I find out for sure? I'd like to say it was clever deduction on my part, but actually it was just old-fashioned bad luck for you. I was waiting for a friend one evening in the bus terminal when I saw you come in and case the place. That made me curious. Then when you took a suitcase out of one of the lockers and went into the men's room, I was even more curious. I ignored the arrival of my friend's bus and waited for almost two hours but I never saw you come out.

"So I started doing a little research myself. Naturally you never considered a woman tail, you only scrutinized men. Then too, I'm a blonde and you don't notice blondes, do you? Just brunettes with blue eyes. Anyhow I followed you as far as the bus terminal twice before I tumbled to your disguise. It really is excellent."

Coletti managed to acknowledge the compliment with a wry jerky nod as the paralysis enfolded him.

Helplessly he watched her pull a pair of thin white gloves from her pocket and put them on. As she polished the arms of the chair in which she sat, he realized that it was the only thing she had touched in the room besides her glass. That object she now picked up along with his own and carried them into the kitchen, where he heard her wash them and put hers back in the cabinet.

She returned with his glass, mixed half a drink and pressed his unresisting fingers around it, then set it on the coffee table.

Moving quickly now, she searched him for the key and disappeared into the bedroom, emerging with the suitcase.

"Back in a minute," she whispered and he caught the spicy scent of her perfume as she passed by on her way to the front door and her apartment.

A minute! How many did he have left? His eyes focused on the clock across the room. 6:15. Taking into

account the hour's difference in time zones, his retirement had lasted exactly four hours. It didn't console him to remember that that was four hours longer than Carlo Murphy'd had.

Kathleen returned without the suitcase and looked around the room, examining the scene she was setting.

At last she let her eyes rest on him and for a moment, he knew she felt regret.

"Won't get away," he gasped with painful effort.

"Ah, but I will," she said conversationally. "I was told the drug stimulates a coronary and is practically undetectable unless specifically tested for. In a few minutes I shall call your Dr. Stein and explain how I discovered you in the throes of an attack. He'll arrive too late, of course. I doubt if he'll think twice about issuing a death certificate.

"Tomorrow I'll tell everyone that I'm so upset at having discovered you that I have to get away for awhile. Then I'll take two suitcases and go."

"No use," Coletti said, speaking his last words and she understood his meaning as he had understood hers. Well, he'd never doubted her intelligence and perversely he almost hoped that she would make it now that he couldn't.

"You may be right," she said, "but I'm forty-three and I have to try."

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by M. G. OGAN

She was scatter-brained, hooked on the sauce, a junkie and probably worse. She had been, that is. Now she was dead in a ditch — and he'd damn well better find her killer, or else . . .

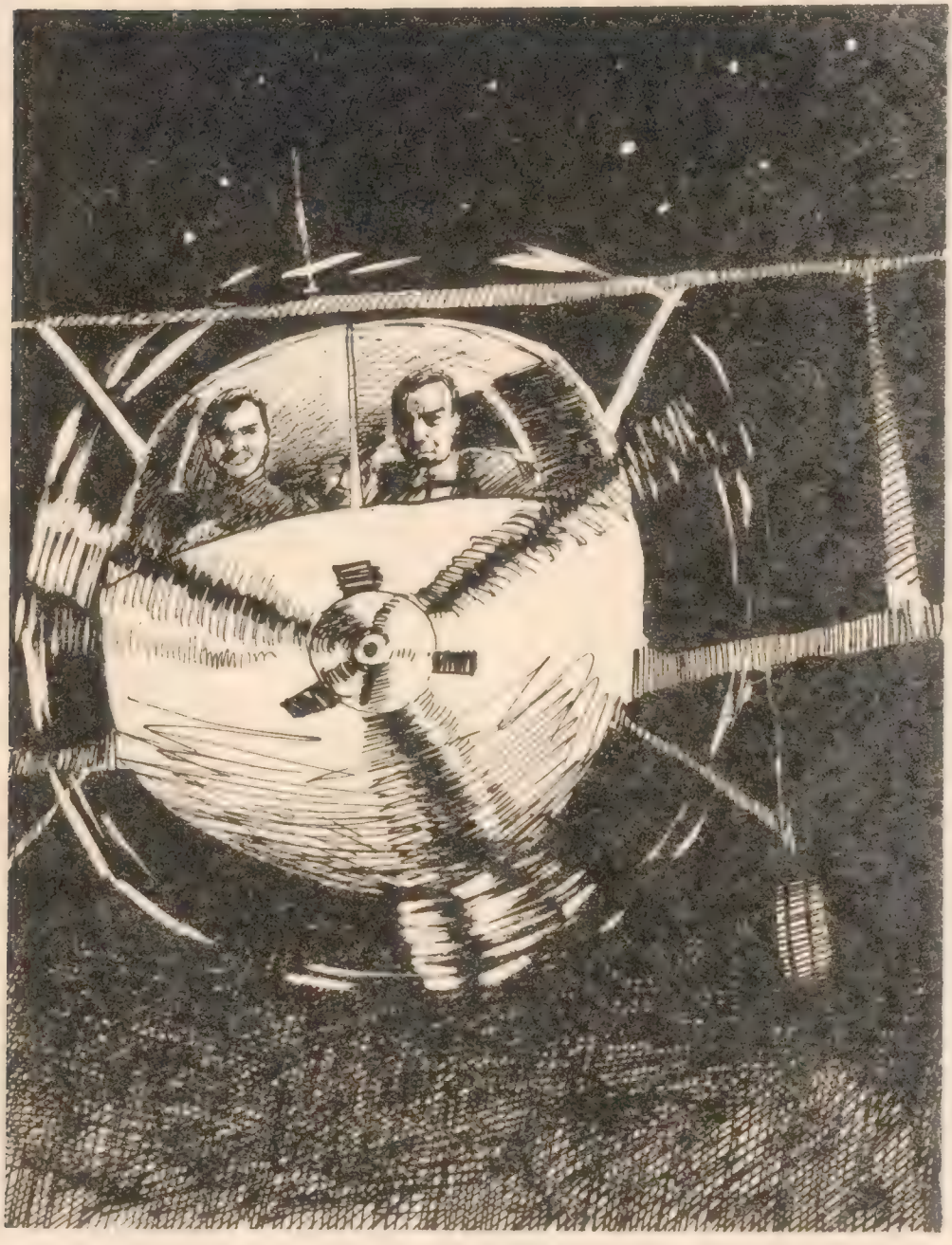
A CALL-BACK slip marked *urgent* crowned the small mountain of paperwork on my desk after two weeks away from the Kirby, Smith & Banks Investigation Services offices on Michigan Boulevard in Chicago.

Major General Whitten had called me from Omaha late Friday afternoon. I'd flown down from Minneapolis earlier that morning.

Dale Whitten resigned from government service when I did, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and that wasn't yesterday, but he'd pulled rank to get his slip on top of my stack of reports from Dean Smith in Puerto Rico, and Jim Banks down in New Orleans. I'm Tom Kirby, who used to be Colonel Kirby in the U.S.A.F.

I put Dale's call-back slip aside to handle later, and sat down to find out how Dean Smith was making

A Gripping Novelet About Tuned-In Kids



out with the American Shoe Company's investigation of equipment shortages in their Puerto Rico factory.

Jim Banks was working with elected officials of a construction workers' union in New Orleans to counter racketeer infiltration. I was interested in scanning his reports, too, before I called Dale at International Gypsum Products in Omaha, Nebraska.

When you've been a colonel, it isn't often you get a chance to let a major general cool his heels. I thought this was one time I might get away with it, but my phone rang.

"Son, why the hell haven't you returned my call?" Dale had bulldozed my secretary — she had instructions to hold all my calls for the next hour. "I want you out here in Omaha this afternoon. I don't care a damn how much you overcharge me, but get here, hear?"

I'd been Whitten's aide the last five years we'd been with the U.S.A.F., before the C.I.A. "borrowed" both of us for secret duty in Central America, so I responded like a Pavlov dog!

"Yes, sir, General, I'll be there."

Gravel sifted out of Dale's voice. "Sure is good to hear your voice, Tom. I know you fellows don't usually take disappearance cases, but I'm a trustee at Covert College now. You remember Loraine, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I certainly do." Dale was a widower, and Loraine his only child. She'd been a budding sixteen the last time I'd seen her in Panama City. "Has she gone off somewhere?"

"Hell, no! Loraine's a graduate student up at the college, a real egghead striking for her M.A. In English. It's her roommate who's disappeared, and I can't get a damned bit of satisfaction from the police up there, or Horace Wright. Wright's supposed to be president of the cat and monkey circus, but he's the soft-collar liberal type who wouldn't give a mere trustee the time of day!"

"There are reputable agencies there in Omaha, sir," I said. "I can give you some names."

"Save your breath." Gravel was back in Dale's voice again. "Call the Omaha tower when you're half an hour out and I'll meet you myself. I reserved a room for you at the Cornhusker's Hotel. You still do fly yourself, don't you, son?"

"Yes sir. A P51 modified in Florida to seat two, if one doesn't mind a piggy-back seat."

Dale chuckled. "That's just the kind of hot-rod you'd settle for after F104s," he said, and hung up.

Miss Conklin slid her beautifully coiffeured blue-gray head through the slit of my partially-opened office door.

"You'll be leaving us this morning, Mr. Kirby?" she asked.

Since she'd been brain-washed by Major General Whitten, it was too

much for me to expect an apology or explanation from Miss Conklin, but her next statement made me want to climb the wall!

"I've called the airport, Mr. Kirby. Your plane will be ready to take off for Omaha within the hour."

"Miss Conklin, why don't you call me *Colonel* Kirby?" I slathered my Air Force title with sarcasm. "Let's not be so informal around here!"

I'd startled her, but having just spoken with a major general, my sarcasm was over her head. "Yes, sir, Colonel Kirby."

I stared at her, made sure she wasn't putting me on, then said, "Congratulations, Miss Conklin."

"Whatever for, Colonel Kirby?"

"You've just joined Major General Whitten's first team as my aide."

"Is that good?"

"You won't think so if I have to fire you so I can have a secretary again, Miss Conklin. Close the door and only listen to my calls on your own extension, after this. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir, Col — I mean, Mr. Kirby."

The door clicked shut.

Miss Conklin was back on the intercom. "Shall I have your plane rolled back in the hangar, Mr. Kirby?"

"No, Miss Conklin. Since I'm not a Canadian goose, I'd have a hard time flying to Omaha without it. Just get me Jim Banks on the wire, and then try for Dean Smith in Puerto Rico."

"Yes, sir!"

Within a minute she'd reached Jim at his hotel in New Orleans. Jim Banks was with the National Security Agency before joining Dean and me.

"What's the situation down there?" I asked.

"Don't you have my reports?"

"Yes, but I don't have time to read them. I also don't have time to explain why I don't have time."

Jim's the scholarly type without much sense of humor. "You sound busy up there. I've been getting help from the D.A. down here, and some leads from the police, so I think we'll make progress."

"That sounds fine," I told him. Miss Conklin was flashing a light on the base of my phone to indicate she had Dean on another wire. "Stay alive."

Dean Smith was F.B.I. before his family got too large for a government salary. He'd asked for a briefing from Miss Conklin, while I was speaking with Jim, and had gotten it.

"I worked with a Captain Daly with the Iowa state police," he told me, "so call on him for help if you need it, Tom. He's a smart cop, or used to be when I was F.B.I. Now I suppose you'd like to know how I'm making out."

"In a few words, yes."

"The shoe company's local factory manager has just bought him-

self a yacht and a house over on Bimini, for cash, and in another name. He gets ten thousand a year, but he's spent close to sixty thousand on Bimini."

"I'd say you're making out."

"Proof will take a few weeks longer."

"I figured it would," I said. "Spring climate in Puerto Rico must be hard to beat."

"The rum is good, and it's cheap, too," Dean said. "Have fun in Omaha."

I scribbled zeros on a blank pad of paper and wondered why my partners always seemed to get the choice cases. Omaha in late May is nice, but New Orleans and Puerto Rico are better—it rains in Minneapolis—and I wasn't looking forward to Major General Whitten.

I dotted eyes into one zero, drew a mouth, tried to catch the exact tilt of Loraine's freckled nose, but couldn't.

At sixteen she'd been a honey-blonde kid with a seriously beautiful face, and a wicked enough backhand to lick me at tennis every time we played a few sets. My tennis back then wasn't bad, either.

Wondering what kind of young woman she'd become, I decided maybe my luck wasn't all bad. Loraine must have taken after her mother, because she hadn't reminded me of Dale at all.

Miss Conklin was on the intercom again. "They've called from the hangar, Mr. Kirby. Traffic is light this morning. It won't be later today. They suggest you make it to O'Hare as soon as possible."

I was suddenly anxious to spend a few hours in the air, with no telephone, no intercom, and no stack of reports I had to read.

"I'm on my way," I told Miss Conklin.

CLINTON IS ON the Iowa side of the Mississippi, and I used it as a checkpoint on my flight to Omaha. My P51 was cruising at three-hundred miles an hour when the river was below, and Omaha was only three-hundred air miles ahead. But my map showed an unlighted landing strip a mile west of Denton, Iowa, the town of four thousand nearest Covert College. I swung over on a bearing that would take me over the campus and that strip, slanting down from 10,000 feet.

A carpet of neat farmhouses with freshly painted outbuildings unreeled beneath me, in a maze of green fields that were dotted with grazing cattle.

I circled north of Cedar Rapids to stay out of the air traffic south of that city. I was cruising at one-fifty now and down to 5,000 feet. Straight roads make central Iowa a checkerboard of green from the air.

It was a cloudless day with horizon to horizon visibility. I raised Ames and swung to a due west compass bearing.

Covert College is privately en-

dowed, dates back to 1851. Today it is a sprawling but pleasant cluster of mellowed red-brick buildings, dominated by Memorial Library, situated on the brow of a hill. A tower that looks like a cement wedding cake crowns the library. I was down to 1,000 and flying one-hundred-forty miles per hour as I approached the campus.

The P51 stalls at a hundred and ten. I maintained 1,000 feet, but throttled down to a hundred and twenty, tilting my right wing up for a clearer view of the campus. My flight path was suddenly slashed by a vertically climbing biplane!

It was the first Beech Staggerwing I'd seen in the air, despite all the praise I'd heard about this classic, a clean-lined ship with the leading edge of the upper wing behind that of the lower, making it the only really stall-proof airplane.

At the speed I was flying, if my stall-prone P51 butted into his prop turbulence, I was going to spin in! I dived my plane, shoving the throttle up to the firewall, snatched it level, only to see the library tower rapidly filling my windshield.

I flipped my P51 into a vertical bank, pulling back on the stick, and grazed past the tower with only feet to spare. Swearing at the reckless pilot of the Staggerwing, I pulled up into an almost vertical climb. I'd lost sight of him for the moment, but had his number — N48973 — and my righteous indignation was going to ground him as soon as I could lodge a complaint in Omaha!

I saw him, then, far below me, coming in to land at the airstrip I'd planned to check.

As my heart and pulse resumed their normal beat, the humor of the situation overwhelmed my indignation. For a pilot supposed to be combat-wise and always alert, I'd fallen into a flying trance, to be bounced by a 1948 Staggerwing probably piloted by a college kid.

Two can play the bouncing game. I did a wingover, and pushed the P51's nose down. I aimed my ship to buzz the Staggerwing pilot just as he shot down and locked his landing gear, to flare out for a three-point landing. I skimmed a foot

over his prop arc, to lay a streak of turbulent air the length of the paved strip, pulling up steeply to miss power lines and a grove of trees behind the hangar at the end of the strip.

The Staggerwing hit, bounced, and swerved off the paving, hit the grass, bouncing again. Then the plane was on the ground, tearing up turf as the pilot locked brakes and ground-looped in a beautiful cloud of dust.

The strip was a scant 2,000 feet, and I needed 1,900 of them to land and roll-out my P51 without burning tires, but I came around and shot down full flaps. It was a sharp landing. My plane rolled to a gentle stop in front of the hangar.

I'd cut my switches and gas flow by the time the Staggerwing limped across the grass, one tire blown out and the shock struts damaged.

I popped my canopy and slid down off the wing feeling guilty.

The Staggerwing's pilot was a husky, darkly handsome six-footer, Max Hunter. If I'd scared him, it didn't show in his boyish grin as he strode toward me.

He'd read my name where it was lettered beneath the P51's cockpit coaming.

"I guess that makes us all even, Mr. Kirby," he said, introducing himself. "I should have known better than to bounce you."

"You damn near slammed me into the library tower," I told him, "but we're both fools. Did you get much damage besides the blown tire and shock struts?"

"No, except to my nervous system."

We spent a lazy half hour inspecting each other's airplanes, and talking about flying. I learned Hunter was the student body president at Covert. He told me his father owned 50,000 acres in the San Joachin Valley of California near Fresno.

"We grow wine grapes," he said. "You've got to come out and see the spread. Dad flies a Cessna 180 on business to Los Angeles and San Francisco. There's a paved and lighted strip on our property that's half a mile long."

Max Hunter used his Staggerwing to fly out home every other weekend.

"I have a girl friend out there," he told me.

He was studying to become an electronics engineer.

"What are you doing out here?" he finally asked.

"Do you know Loraine Whitten?"

Hunter grinned. "Who doesn't? Her father's a trustee. Loraine is a sweet person."

"She'd like to know what's happened to her roommate."

"Gale Crain?" Hunter's face clouded. "I don't know why Loraine put up with Gale as long as she did. She had a nickname on the campus."

"Loraine?"

"No, Gale Crain. We called her

the Weird Sister. You know, from *Macbeth.* Smart as they come, but crazy as a loon. Do you want to know what I think?"

"I'd like to know."

"I think after a bad trip on LSD that Gale took off for Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. All of us think she did, except, maybe, Loraine."

"What is the drug situation on campus? It's been a lot of years since I graduated from the University of Illinois."

"Pot's permissible. Not legal, of course, but so wasn't liquor during prohibition, I'm told. President Wright is a broad-minded sort of guy."

"How about acid?"

Max Hunter scowled. "Dangerous stuff, and we know it. A few take trips, but not many. I don't use pot myself, or anything else." He flashed a disarming grin. "I'm a real square, Mr. Kirby."

Hunter thought I was on a fool's errand if I suspected anything sinister in Gale's disappearance, but promised me any help I might need.

"Covert College is sort of closed up against all strangers who come poking around," he said. "These kids take the academic freedom bit seriously. Wright is sort of an idol to them."

"And how do you feel about Wright?"

"I'll take the fifth on that, if you don't mind."

MAJOR GENERAL Dale Whitten was waiting impatiently by the time I'd worked my way down through the air traffic stack at Omaha, and taxied into the visiting planes area. Arrival in his early fifties hadn't marred Dale's erect military stance, nor erased the harsh lines of his face. I knew what his first question would be before he asked it.

"What took you so long, boy?"

"Do you want an explanation or an apology?"

A quick grin erased some of those harsh lines for a moment. "Hell, I can't help barking at people, Tom. You ought to know that. Come on, let's sneak a mid-afternoon drink at your hotel."

Dale was silent as he steered his black Lincoln through Omaha traffic to the Cornhusker. He didn't speak until we were in my top-floor room with drinks.

"Loraine will drive down this evening to brief us," he said then. "She's all upset about this thing, Tom."

"How about Gale Crain's family?"

Dale held his drink up to admire the color. "I don't recall telling you her name, boy."

I sipped my drink, and waited.

"Gale doesn't have a family," Dale said finally. "She was raised in boarding homes. Who is there to turn on the heat when a girl without any family disappears?"

"You and Loraine."

"In this case, you're exactly right."

"Maybe you'd better fill me in," I said. "We know it was two weeks ago she disappeared. Did she take her clothes?"

"As a matter of fact, she did."

"Did she leave a note?"

Dale shook his head. "No note. Just bugged out."

"What about money?"

"I don't know. I've only talked on the phone to Loraine."

"Could she have been pregnant?"

"That's a hell of a question to ask me!"

"I thought Loraine might have given you the answer."

"You ask her about that, Tom."

"I'll do that," I told Dale, "if you'll do something for me."

"Name it."

"What's your real reason for injecting me into this situation, General?"

"Horace Wright." Dale spoke evenly, without a moment's hesitation. "I graduated from Covert before I went to the Point. I love that school. So does Loraine, but Wright is taking it to hell in a basket. Find Gale Crain for me, Tom, and I have a hunch Horace Wright will be finished as a college administrator."

"Only a hunch?"

"So far only that," he admitted.

"What you're saying is that he's somehow implicated in the girl's disappearance."

"Precisely."

"You want me to find Gale and prove how he's tied in."

"Right, again."

"Let's order another drink."

"Why not?" Dale strode to the phone.

While he ordered, I thought. Wright had crossed Dale somewhere along the line. Generals are different from you and me. They exist at the top of the chain of command even after they're civilians. Insubordination is intolerable to them.

Dale, with Loraine's help, was using Gale's disappearance from the campus to do a hatchet job on Horace Wright.

I was very much inclined at that moment to go along with Max Hunter's explanation of her disappearance.

"How old is Gale?" I asked while we waited for room service.

"Eighteen. Loraine is twenty-six now."

"Dale, I'm going to listen to Loraine when she gets here this evening. Then I'm going to locate Gale, and I don't think that will be hard, or too expensive. Include me out of your feud with Horace Wright, however."

The general squinted at me.

"We'll have it that way," he said as if he'd decided the matter.

"When do you expect Loraine?"

"Along about six o'clock. She drives at an even thirty-five in her Volks, and fastens the seat belt going around the corner for a tube of toothpaste. I don't understand where

that girl gets her streak of caution."

"From her mother?"

"I suppose."

Our fresh drinks came. Dale tipped the waiter. It was then that the room phone jangled. It was five-thirty.

"My office, probably," Dale said, and picked up the phone.

"Where?" was his first question, as color drained out of his face.

"When?" he asked next, and then: "What are her chances?"

All the starch was out of the man when he'd hung up.

"Loraine has had an accident," he said. "A witness says her car was crowded off the road, just outside of Council Bluffs, and she slammed it into a culvert."

"How badly is she hurt?"

"Depressed skull fracture. They have taken her to the Mercy Hospital over there."

I was on my feet. "Let's go."

Dale drew a shaking hand over his face.

"It's my fault," he said, hoarsely. "I should have known."

It was no time to ask questions.

I slid under the wheel of the Lincoln when it was brought around from the hotel's garage.

Loraine was up in the operating room when we arrived at Mercy Hospital. An uncomfortable young Iowa state trooper was waiting for us in the third floor room reserved for relatives and friends sweating out operations.

A green-gowned doctor was talking with Dale. The trooper and I moved away from them, and I flashed my identification. His name was Lance Jordan, and he told me Captain Ryan had retired two years ago.

"The girl's chances are just fifty-fifty," Lance said. "Only her seat belt saved her."

"What about this witness?"

"It's an older woman, Maude Laidley. She claims a black convertible ran Miss Whitten off the road and into the culvert. She lives

in Logan, halfway between here and Denton."

"Did she get the license?"

"No, she didn't. They never do. She isn't even sure of the make. From her description it could have been a Buick, or an Olds. She did give us something, however."

"A description of the driver?"

Lance Jordan nodded. "Remember those long-billed baseball caps Halsey made popular? He was young, and wearing one of those, pulled down on his forehead to hide his face."

The young trooper's scrubbed face mirrored indecision. There was more to Loraine's accident than he was telling me, but he didn't know whether he could trust my discretion.

"What's off the record about this accident?" I asked.

"We'd write it up as another accident caused by an unknown reckless driver," he said slowly, "except for one thing. A kilo of heroin was taped under the dash of Miss Whitten's Volks."

I was too shocked to say anything, immediately.

"You should know," Lance Jordan went on, "the hard stuff has been coming into Iowa from Mexico for the past two years. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics has been breaking their teeth on it. How does it get up here directly, and who brings it? It looks as if we've given them part of the answer now."

"A kilo, or thirty-five ounces, is wholesale junk, all right."

"It sure is!" Jordan agreed. "Do you think it's possible she didn't know the stuff was in her car?"

"I'd say probable, when you add the black convertible to the puzzle."

"A frame-up?" Lance Jordan was incredulous.

DALE WHITTEN was positive someone was framing Loraine. "She would never mix in anything like that, boy!"

Chances for Loraine's physical recovery were fifty-fifty, but Dale had been warned she'd remain semi-conscious for an indefinite period of time.

"You talk to this Laidley woman," he ordered, "and get the guy who tried to kill my girl. He'll have answers. Forget Gale Crain."

"She's the one who may have the answers we really need, sir."

Dale stared at me, and I sensed that he was uncertain, probably for the first time in his life.

"You'd better take this whole thing off me, Colonel Kirby," he said, finally. "Damn the expense, or how many people you need to help, bring back some answers!" He stared around at the waiting room as if to familiarize himself with every detail of it. "I'll be here for awhile when you need new orders."

"Very good, sir." It wasn't a good time to remind him we were

no longer in the service, and that I cut my own orders these days.

I could stop in Logan and interview Maude Laidley on my way up to Denton, and Covert College.

"I'll be in touch," I said, and left Dale there to learn whether Loraine would live or die.

Lance Jordan must have described me to the agent from the Federal Narcotics Bureau who was in the Mercy Hospital's main lobby.

"Mr. Kirby?" He'd caught me at the glass front doors. "Can we have a word?"

"Why not?"

This was Special Agent Andruss. He had a warrant to detain Loraine for questioning, which meant, under the circumstances, he could not talk with her until the doctors said it was all right. Andruss or someone else would be there in the hospital until then.

Andruss knew why I'd flown out to Omaha. He also had my full pedigree.

"We have an undercover man on the campus who's working on this thing," he told me. "I mean the Crain girl's disappearance, as well as the narcotics angle." He gave me a card with only an unlisted phone number. "Whatever you turn up, report to whoever answers," he said. "Does that sound like an order?"

"Frankly, yes, it does."

Andruss was a gray, little man you'd never notice in a crowd, one of those faceless persons, but Uncle Sam's full authority was behind him when he said, "That's just what it is, Kirby."

"I'll keep in touch," I promised.

I took a cab back to the Cornhusker. There weren't any messages for me at the desk. I had supper sent up to my room while I showered and changed clothes.

I checked up on Andruss by calling one of the F.B.I.'s special agents in Omaha who'd known Dean. The man was who his credentials said he was.

Whenever narcotics are involved, you can't be too careful if you want to go on living, and at thirty nine, I like to feel I have quite a few years left.

I phoned the hangar at the airport and told them I wouldn't need my P51 for a day or so. Then I called the hotel desk and asked them to rent me a car.

Maude Laidley lived in a small cottage beside U.S. 30 as it leaves Logan bound for Denton. She was a spinster in her middle sixties, living alone. She immediately decided I was from Loraine's insurance company.

"You come in and sit awhile, Mr. Kirby," she said, "and I'll convince you it wasn't the young woman's fault at all she wrecked her car."

I took the sofa. Miss Laidley picked up her patch of needlework. She talked and poked at the linen with various colors of yarn.

"I was right behind her little

car when it happened," she said. "Not following too closely, you understand. But I was behind her."

"Tell me about the convertible."

"The driver stayed behind my car quite awhile," she said, "and didn't dim his lights. There wasn't much traffic, and he could have passed me. He didn't. Then there was this culvert, sort of a narrow bridge, if you know what I mean. Well, coming to that, he did pass me, going very fast. He swerved his car toward the young woman's, just after she'd waved to him. I put on my brakes . . ."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Laidley. Did you say Miss Whitten waved to the convertible's driver?"

"Why, yes, I did."

"Did you tell the state troopers that? The men who came out to investigate the accident?"

"I don't believe I did." She laid aside her needlework and stopped rocking. "That's important, isn't it?"

"It could be, unless she was just waving him to pass her."

Miss Laidley shook her head. "It wasn't that kind of a wave."

She told me the rest of it. Loraine had never had a chance. The other car hadn't touched hers, but to avoid a sideswipe she'd swung over onto the shoulder, smacking into the wire cement abutment head-on.

Miss Laidley had stayed with Loraine, sending the next passing car to phone for help.

"It's a pity her car wasn't equipped with one of those new shoulder straps," she said. "Her seat belt saved her from everything but hitting her forehead on the top rim of the steering wheel."

Miss Laidley went on to say that she thought Loraine was a beautiful young woman.

She couldn't give me a better description of the convertible's driver than she'd given the state police. I refused a cup of tea as politely as possible and drove from Logan up to Denton.

When I'd checked into Denton's Village Inn, I phoned Mercy Hospital. Loraine was down from the operating room, in intensive care, and was critical, but prognosis was hopeful. Dale thought she'd recognized him, but hadn't yet spoken anything that made sense.

"She keeps quoting some lines from the opening scene of *'Macbeth,'* he told me. "About weird sisters, foul and filthy air, vanishing on the heath, and so on. Do you know your Shakespeare, boy?"

"Probably not as well as I should." Max Hunter had said, about Gale Crain, 'We called her the weird sister', but Loraine was an English major. Semi-conscious, she was liable to babble what she could remember, trying to unlock her mind.

"When you can," I urged Dale, "try to find out who it was, driving a convertible, she waved to just before the accident."

"You mean driving the car that ran hers off the road?"

"That's right."

"Hell!" Dale Whitten exploded. "That means she knew the s.o.b., doesn't it?"

"Unless she was in the habit of waving to strangers it does."

"She wasn't," Dale said, shortly. "She knew him. These doctors say she's liable not to remember the accident at all," he complained. "It may be days before she even knows who she is."

"This is a nasty question, Dale, but I have to have the best answer you can give me."

"Go ahead, ask it."

"Did Loraine ever use LSD, smoke pot, or shoot Heroin?" If she was on the hard stuff, the doctors there will know."

"You're asking because of that dope they found in her car, aren't you? I know about that. No, she wasn't a user. That's the hep word for it, isn't it, boy?"

"One of them."

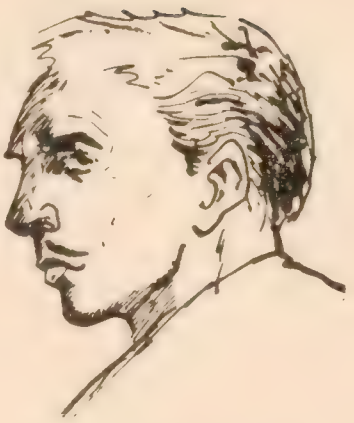
"Loraine wasn't on any kind of drugs. We've talked about it, and I have her word."

"Did she mention Gale Crain as a user?"

"No."

I told him where I could be reached.

"Tomorrow I'll be scouting around Covert," I said, "and by tomorrow night I should be back down there."



"You know where to find me," Dale said.

CHIEF OF POLICE in Denton was a Carl Rath. I found his name, address, and phone number in the slim phone directory for Denton. He was home and invited me to drive out to his house, when I told him what had happened and why I was in Denton.

"I don't think I can be much help, though," he warned me. "You have heard about a thing they call academic freedom, haven't you?"

"No pigs rooting around on campus?"

"You've heard."

Rath's was a modest cottage in a new development on the eastern edge of Denton. He was a fit looking man in his late forties, lounging in slacks, a sweatshirt, and slippers, watching television. He snapped off the set when he brought me into the living room.

"My wife's already in bed," he told me, "but there's cold beer in the refrigerator."

"I don't think so, thanks."

Rath didn't insist. He settled back into his easy chair and regarded me with shrewd, grayish-blue eyes—poised to answer or parry my questions.

"Your jurisdiction doesn't include the campus, I take it?"

"Nope. That's county. If they need help out there, they'll call us. We're not to call them."

"You wouldn't know anything, then, about a girl named Gale Crain?"

Those shrewd eyes narrowed. "Officially, no."

"I'm trying to find her. What do you know off the record?"

"This Miss Whitten who had the accident suddenly got worried about her a few days ago."

"Did she come to you about Gale?"

"No, but a friend of hers did, a nice kid named Max Hunter. He wanted to know if anyone else had been asking about Gale. No one else had. That's all there was to it, except I explained that if he, or Miss Whitten, could give us something definite, we'd run it through police channels."

"What did Hunter say to that?"

"He was polite, and thanked me for the information. I got the idea he wasn't really worried about the Crain girl. Hunter only came to me, I think, because Miss Whitten asked him to."

"What about drugs on campus?"

Rath's was a tight, enigmatic smile. "We got no drug problem in Denton."

"They do have out at Covert?"

"I didn't say that."

I got up to leave. Rath followed me to the door, and then outside, where I'd parked my rented Chev in front of his house. It was a balmy May night with the smell of spring in the air.

"I'm cooperative, Kirby," he said, standing beside the car. "Don't get the idea I'm not."

"I plan to have a chat with Horace Wright tomorrow."

Rath chuckled. "If you can get the right time of day from that bubblehead, let me know. On the other hand, if you like his type, forget I said that."

Rath reached in the car to give my shoulder a friendly pat before I drove away.

Max Hunter was in the lobby of the Village Inn. "How's Loraine Whitten?" was his anxious question.

"We think she'll make it. I've just talked with Chief Rath, and he didn't know she'd had an accident until I told him. Where did you get the word?"

"Can we talk in your room?"

"Come on up."

My suitcase was on the stand at the foot of the bed, opened. Max Hunter gave it a casual glance before he sat on the desk chair. "You

take the comfortable one, Mr. Kirby. You must be tired."

"Now you mention it, I am." I untied my shoes and kicked them off when I was relaxed in the chair. "I still want to know how you found out Loraine had an accident on her way to Omaha."

Hunter grinned. "Would you believe I'm psychic?"

"No."

"That puts me on a spot." Hunter scowled down at the patterned rug. "No one else on the campus knows she's in Mercy Hospital, and what they found in her car. Does that tell you something?" he asked, hopefully.

"No, Max. Draw me a diagram."

"Okay. You talked with a fellow named Andruss in the hospital lobby. He works for the government, and so do I."

"All right. Until I can check it out, I'll buy that much. Now, what about Loraine?"

"You mean the kilo found in her car?"

"That, and who caused her accident, so that kilo would be found, with Loraine dead or dying."

"Frankly, it doesn't look too good, Mr. Kirby. I didn't give you a straight yarn about Gale Crain, you know. She was hooked, and hooked hard, on Hazel."

"Hazel?"

"H. Heroin," Max Hunter said, impatiently. "She was a mainliner. It was Loraine who tipped us off."

"Us?"

"Yes, Dr. Wright and me. The crazy kid needed a chance, so I flew her home with me two weeks ago. She's with my mother and father, getting medical care."

"Does Loraine know this?"

Max Hunter nodded. "It was partly her idea, Mr. Kirby, So I can't understand why she stirred up you and General Whitten. I haven't had a chance to see her since I found out about that. Something smells."

"Evidently Loraine thought so, too."

"I don't like it, Mr. Kirby, but Loraine could be the runner we've been looking for. Who would ever suspect her? I certainly wouldn't have!"

"Who would be her connection in Denton, or on the campus?"

"I wish I knew! Stuff is coming in up here from Mexico, maybe by car, maybe by truck. From here it goes down to Omaha, for cutting and distribution, but that isn't my end of the investigation."

"Who pushed the stuff to Gale?"

"How much do you know about junkies?"

"You tell me about Gale, Max."

"She'd had an overdose. Loraine saved her, but Gale was a holy mess! She was too stupid with the stuff to talk when we got her off campus. Now she may be able to give us some answers."

"Which is why you took her home?"

Hunter grinned. "You're reading

my skull, man! I have that in mind, sure. Maybe she's the one we're after. Loraine drove home every weekend. It's possible Gale could have been using Loraine for a runner, without Loraine knowing anything about it."

"What about the kilo in her car today?"

Hunter frowned. "That doesn't look good, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," I had to admit.

"After all, how do we know Loraine simply didn't lose control of her car?" Max Hunter said. "So a crazy driver crowded her a little. You know women drivers."

"I know one who says Loraine didn't have an accident, and that she knew the driver who crowded her off the road."

"Are you putting me on?"

"Why should I, Max?"

"No reason." He clasped his hands between his knees and stared down at them. "No reason at all, Mr. Kirby. Do you carry a weapon?"

I remembered his glance at my suitcase. "No. Do you think I should?"

Max Hunter produced a .38 Police Special from a shoulder holster under his loose jacket.

"I have a permit for it," he explained. "Andruss arranged it for me. Narcotics is big business."

"And rough."

"Very rough." Hunter raised his head to meet my eyes. "You suit yourself, but if what that witness says is true, we know the connection is playing fast and loose now, don't we?"

"I'd say."

"Are you coming out to the campus tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"The parking space for student cars is across the campus from the dorms. I think I know whose convertible it was that caused Loraine's accident. Mine."

He'd put away the revolver. "I'm cramming for final exams, Mr. Kirby. My car was out of its parking space all of today, after I drove in from the airstrip. When I went to get it tonight, to drive in town, the engine was hot, and it had been cross-wired."

"That gives me something to sleep on," I said.

"Say, you must be awfully tired, Mr. Kirby." Hunter jumped up and swung the desk chair back in place. "I have an early class, too. We don't know each other on campus. Okay?"

"Okay, Max. Good night."

When he was gone, I phoned the number Andruss had left me. My call was switched to the hospital where he was still standing by in the lobby.

"Is Max Hunter your undercover man up here in Denton?" I asked.

Andruss hesitated. "Yes," he said, finally.

I told him there was a possibility that Loraine knew the driver who'd caused her accident.

"It's also possible," I said, "that he was driving Max Hunter's car."

"We'll look into that angle," he promised.

I phoned Dale Whitten. By that time, it was one o'clock in the morning. Loraine was still mumbling "Macbeth," he told me. "She thinks the word 'heath' should tell us something," Dale said. "I don't get it, do you ,boy?"

"I'll look into it tomorrow, Dale."

"She's going to make it, boy." I couldn't tell whether he was cheering himself, or trying to encourage me.

I needed all the encouragement I could get! I left a call for eight o'clock in the morning at the desk, and went to bed.

It was still dark when my phone jangled. I snapped on the light. It was four o'clock, and still dark outside.

"Mr. Kirby?" It was Max Hunter, and he sounded upset, or excited. "We've got to fly out to the coast right away!"

"What's happened?"

"Gale has happened. She's bugged-out on my folks. We've got to find her, Mr. Kirby. I'm sure she's the key to this whole mess."

We decided to fly down to Omaha in the Staggerwing, and fuel-up my P51 for the flight out to the Hunter Ranch in the San Joachin Valley. I planned to phone Dale from Omaha. Within fifteen minutes, I was at the airstrip. Hunter had his ship out of the hangar and warmed-up. He offered me a thermos of black coffee.

"That should get your other eye open, Mr. Kirby."

I thanked him and took a good slug of the coffee, then tried not to be nervous while he pulled the Staggerwing off the strip. I had to admit to myself that the kid was an excellent pilot.

"You still sleepy?" he asked, when we'd climbed out to 3,000. The Staggerwing seats four. The back two seats had an arm between them that would lower, making them into a bed. "Why don't you crawl back there for a snooze? It's going to be a long flight in your Mustang to the coast."

I stretched out, but didn't plan to close my eyes. I drank again from the coffee thermos.

ENGINE SOUND THINS out as you gain altitude. When I opened my eyes, and listened, I realized that Max Hunter had pushed the Staggerwing up near its ceiling; 18,000 feet was the altimeter reading when I raised on an elbow to stare at the instrument panel.

"What's happened to Omaha?" I asked. I was groggy and my voice was thick.

"Are you awake so soon, Mr. Kirby?" Hunter grinned back at me over his shoulder.

"Where are we?"

He glanced at the strip map strapped to his right thigh; then out of the plane at the ground. "We've

just passed over Midland, Texas."

I climbed up into the seat beside Hunter, and checked the compass. We were flying almost due south. I'd trained near Midland before shipping out to Korea. I touched dual control units on my side of the plane. They were locked tight.

"You're making quite a detour, Max." *Heath!* The word doesn't just mean a desolate area in Britain or Scotland. It can also mean desert. "I take it we're bound for a strip in the desert south of the Rio Grande?"

"Yes, sir, we are, Mr. Kirby." Max Hunter was still cheerful, but now there was a gloating note. The .38 was in his hand, suddenly, pointed at my head. "You're going to have to hike back to civilization when I've refueled and taken off for another desert strip, deeper in Mexico. Hell, I had a good thing for two years now, so I should complain?"

There would be no hiking out for me, I knew, but I played along with the fiction. "No girl friend out in California, Max?"

"No." He laughed. "Who needs a steady? There is a Hunter Ranch, though, and a pair of square parents, so my cover was pretty good. It fooled Andruss."

"I take it you're mobbed-up?"

"Oh, sure. I made Kansas City connections before I transfered from California at Berkeley to Covert. The family there needs new, bright, college-type talent. I played the double-agent game with Andruss, of course. God, the Feds were dumb!"

"Let me guess, Max. You used Loraine to run the stuff down to Omaha, after you flew it in from Mexico on those weekend junkets when you were supposed to be in Cal. Right?"

"Right, Mr. Kirby. She always parked her Volks at International Gypsum's plant, and drove home with the general. A night watchman there made the pickup. Clever?"

"She didn't know?"

Max Hunter laughed, delightedly. "Never even suspected, until I goofed up with Gale. That was a mistake, but fun while it lasted."

"You hooked Gale on H?"

"Sure, why not? It took her mind off being pregnant. An overdose didn't get her out of the way, so I said we'd fly home and be married. Loraine didn't know about her being pregnant."

"How did Loraine find out that Gale wasn't out in California with your parents?"

Max Hunter cocked the pistol.

"I'm not going to use this in the air, unless I have to," he said, "so don't get bright ideas. You might rack us both up."

"I'm still groggy from whatever you put in that coffee. I won't give you any trouble. A little hike in the Mexican desert is just what I need to stretch my legs."

"That's being smart, Mr. Kirby. How Loraine began to suspect I hadn't taken Gale home is spooky!

She had this vivid dream about Gale, and told me about it. Do you know, she described this strip where we're going now? Exactly, Mr. Kirby! Even the grave near it."

"Gale's grave?"

"Sure. What else was there to do with that one? I shot her once, in the back of the head. She never knew what hit her." Max Hunter scowled thoughtfully. "Her having that dream really spooks me!"

"What did you tell her?"

"Pretty much the same cock-and-bull you fell for, Gale running away from the ranch, and so on. I said that my father had detectives looking for her. I thought she'd bought it, but then you flew in. I knew it was getting close to bug-out time. I have half a million bucks stashed in a Mexico City bank, Mr. Kirby. That's not bad for two years' work, is it?"

"It's better than I make, Max."

"The way I've made a fool out of Andruss, I thought it would be nice to let him drop on Loraine Whitten. She *was* the runner. Ignorance is supposed to be no excuse so far as the law is concerned, is it?"

A strong flashlight beam shafted straight up from the desert ahead of us.

"Manuel and Rico hear us coming," Hunter said. He pushed down the Staggerwing's nose. "Don't you sweat this landing, Mr. Kirby. I've made it more than a hundred times in the last two years."

Hunter chuckled. "The only bad landing I've ever made was your fault. I paid for that. It took me almost the rest of the day to install new shock struts, and change a tire. Mr. Kirby—"

As he turned his face toward me, I stabbed fingers of my left hand at his eyes. My right hand chopped aside the wrist of the hand holding the gun.

The .38 exploded in the confines of the cockpit with a deafening sound. The slug holed the window on my side of the plane; the slipstream screamed through the bullet hole.

As we struggled, with the gun now sliding around the cockpit floor, the Staggerwing ripped downward, spiraling as it dived, power-on. Bobbing my head as best I could, I weathered the wild punches Hunter was throwing, saw the opening, and cracked my fist squarely on the bridge of his nose, between his eyes.

Max Hunter slumped forward, but then centrifugal force threw him back against the seat, off the stick. I couldn't find how he'd jammed the controls on my side. I had to unbuckle Hunter and pry his limp body over the pilot's seat.

By the time I'd switched into his seat, the desert was close! I kicked the Staggerwing out of its spiral, and eased back the stick. The nose was coming up, but not fast enough. I pulled with all my strength on the stick, certain wings would snap and

the tail would carry away, but Staggerwings were built to last.

I was in level flight a scant fifty feet off the desert. I poured on power to climb out and turn a hundred and eighty degrees. The flashlight marking the strip blinked Morse as I passed over it: COME IN.

Still climbing, flying due north now, I replied by blinking the plane's running lights: WAIT.

I captured the .38 just as Hunter, groaning, made a weak lunge to get a strangle hold on me from behind. I twisted away from him, palming the snub-nose revolver to crack it, hard, against his left cheekbone.

"Damn you," he whimpered, after awhile. "You've broken my nose."

"Do you want to try for a shot through your head?" I asked, evenly.

"No, Mr. Kirby."

"Get into that right hand seat," I ordered, "and strap in tight."

The fight was out of him. Prodded with his own gun, Hunter obeyed. His face was a mess! I'd mashed his nose nearly flat, and laid open a gash on his cheek. He was breathing through his gaping mouth.

"Cinch that seat strap tighter," I ordered, "and put your hands on top of your head."

"But I'm bleeding!" he snuffled.

"So bleed."

I radioed the Midland airport tower, requesting permission for an emergency landing, and also asking for a Border Patrol squad to meet the Staggerwing.

"We have a few minutes before touchdown," I said. "Tell me about it, Max."

Some of his bravado was back. "You mean why?"

"Yes. It's hard for a square like me to understand. Or maybe I'm generation-gapped."

"Mr. Kirby, I've got nearly half a million bucks banked in Mexico City. That's where I was heading when I was rid of you. That's scratch, man!"

"I hope you think so when the judge sets an execution date, Max."

"You are square! Capital punishment is un-American these days. If my folks won't help, I've got enough to hire me a whole battery of smart lawyers. Or my K.C. mob people will take care of me."

"You've forgotten something."

"So what's that?"

"You murdered the girl in Mexico. This Manuel and this Rico were witnesses, weren't they? You can be extradited for murder, Max, and capital punishment isn't un-Mexican."

"They'll never extradite me!"

"You're the big money man, Max." I lined up the Staggerwing to land and shot down the landing gear and flaps. "How much do you want to bet?" I asked, flaring out.

Mexican authorities and a border patrol plane converged on the desert strip, to find Manuel and Rico patiently waiting, as the sun rose. They

pointed out Gale's shallow grave near the strip.

Max Hunter had lied about shooting her only once. She'd been riddled with ten shots!

I caught a commercial flight back to Omaha. Loraine was out of intensive care, and sleeping, so Dale met me at the hotel. I filled in the story I'd given him from Midland over the phone.

Dr. Wright had the news by that time. He reached Dale Whitten in my room.

"Tell you what, boy," Dale said, after listening to a long monologue from the other end of the line, "since we all make mistakes, let's talk this over before you write that letter of resignation."

I was grinning at Dale when he hung up.

"What's so damned funny?" he snapped.

"Nothing, boy."

"Colonel, it's early," he said, "but I think you should order us a drink."

I pointed. "The phone is right over there, boy. Just ask for room service."

Grumbling under his breath, Major General Dale Whitten strode to the phone, snatched it up, and said, "Scotch all right, son?"

"Yes, sir."

In the Next Issue

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

NUCKY JOHNSON

THE MAN WHO STOLE ATLANTIC CITY

by DAVID MAZROFF

A proud, coveted mistress she was, beautiful, rapacious, ever demanding. That was Atlantic City. Queen of the Eastern pleasure places, mistress of every pleasure, sacred and profane, she paid tribute to no man—save one. Nucky Johnson, the sticky fingered boss who had brought a proud city to its knees. This is the story, told for the first time, of a master criminal's rise to power—and of his equally astounding fall. Don't miss it!

Pay a Debt

Silently, alone, a girl stood her lonely vigil over him. With another unseen watcher—Death!

by LEO R. ELLIS

THE YOUNG blonde nurse carried the towel-covered bed pan briskly down the deserted hospital corridor. When she arrived at the prison ward section she turned in, giving the old cop on the desk a big smile as she passed.

The old cop cleared his throat, and a young officer seated in front of a closed door, halfway down the hall, came to his feet.

"You're an improvement over what I've been getting," the young officer said.

"The regular nurse is not on duty. I'm taking her place."

The young officer quickly grasped the door knob. He swung the door open and watched with obvious appreciation as the girl walked through. He closed the door and sat down again.

Beyond the door the hospital room had a single, barred window. The room had only one bed, where a thin, black-haired man was propped up with pillows. The man's left arm hung in a sling and beneath the open pajama jacket his shoulder was heavily bandaged and taped.

The man scowled as the nurse crossed the room and placed the bed pan on the bed.

The nurse leaned over to be kissed. "Hello, Dado baby."

"Cool it, Carol." The man pushed her aside, so he could slip his hand into the bed pan. He brought out a towel-wrapped package, flipped off the cover and scowled at the little snub-nosed automatic in his hand. "What's the idea of bringing me a peashooter?"

"Your brother sent it. I didn't. I supposed Hap thought a small gun would be easier for you to hide."

Dado's thin forefinger slipped in under the guard and pressed the trigger gently. He balanced the weapon in his hand. "I guess it will have to do."

"Some appreciation," Carol sniffed. "I risk my neck to smuggle a gun into you, and what kind of thanks do I get for my effort? None. I tell—"

"Shut up. What else did my brother say?"

"Nothing."

Dado dropped the automatic and grabbed Carol's wrist. He clamped down and twisted until the girl gave a muffled yelp of pain. "Did Hap get a car for us?"

"Yes," Carol whimpered, her eyes brimming with tears. "Hap has a car all gassed up and waiting at his place."

Dado dropped Carol's wrist and picked the gun up again. He rubbed the barrel gently against his cheek as he stared out past the bars on the window.

"I'll bust out of here at nine-thirty tonight. Visiting hours are over at nine, so the halls should be empty. The night employees use the East parking lot, so you shouldn't be noticed when you drive in. Keep the motor running. I'll go down the fire escape at the end of the hall. That will bring me out on the East side of the building. Show me which way East is."

"I'm not that dumb. I know that much."

Again Dado dropped the automatic. This time his hand shot out, snakelike, to slap Carol across the face with his open palm. "Which way is East?"

Carol backed away. "You didn't have to do that, Dado."

"Which way is East?"

Sullenly Carol pointed.

"It's not fair you should make

out that I'm so dumb," she whimpered. "At least I was smart enough not to get caught by the cops and that's more than—"

The girl's hand flew to her mouth to cut off the words. She stared at Dado, fright in her eyes.

"Don't bug me, baby." Dado rubbed the automatic between his palms. "You bug me and I'll take care of you once I get out of here. Now listen and get this straight. I want you down there in the parking lot at nine-thirty sharp, with the motor running. Bring along a suit of my clothes so I can get out of these pajamas. Be sure to call my brother before you leave for the hospital."

Carol nodded and Dado gave her a shove when she leaned over to be kissed. "Beat it before they send up the real nurse."

The Blue Moon Motel was situated on the main highway on the edge of town. Halfway along the line of cabins, in unit number eight, Carol poured whisky from a bottle into two tumblers. She no longer wore the nurse unform. She had on a dress so short it exposed most of her legs, and so tight it accentuated all the curves and the bulges.

Carol carried the tumblers across the room and handed one of them to a young man seated on the sofa. Carol raised her glass.

"To our wedding," she said. "Just think, a week ago I had never heard of Ray Downing. Now I'm going to become Mrs. Ray Downing."

Ray Downing was a young man of medium build. He was not handsome, his face was too intense, and his eyes too deeply set.

"It was fate that brought us together," he said soberly.

"I certainly believe in fate." Carol took a sip of her drink and sank down on the sofa. "I was so scared and worried after the cops busted Dado for the savings and loan job. I didn't know which way to turn, I was at the end of my rope when I met you."

Carol reached over and took Ray's hand. "We're going to drive straight through to your ranch, aren't we?"

"Straight through."

"Except for one stop," Carol said quickly. "We're going to stop at Las Vegas to get married."

"Of course, the one stop."

Carol sipped her drink. "I'm glad I told you everything—I mean all about me and Dado and what we was to each other. That makes it seem so right." She stared into her drink. "Dado will be dead in a few minutes. I mean you're sure everything will work out all right?"

"Dado Corone will die at nine-thirty tonight. That automatic you gave him is useless. I took all the gunpowder out of the shells."

Carol gave a shrill laugh. "Dado will die all right. He's a crazy man when he has a gun in his hand. At nine-thirty he'll come through that

door pulling the trigger." Carol clutched Ray's arm. "As soon as we know—I mean as soon as we're real sure Dado is dead—we're going to leave town."

"Will leave when these is definite proof Dado is dead."

"That's the best way. But then hanging around too long wouldn't be smart—I mean with Dado's brother here and all."

Carol jumped to her feet. "Oh Lord, I was supposed to call Dado's brother." She rushed over to the dresser and fumbled in her purse. "I have Hap's number here somewhere. Oh, Dado will kill me."

Ray rose and came over behind the girl. "Dado won't kill anyone."

Carol pulled out a slip of paper and carried it to the telephone. She placed the paper on the table and dialed the number.

"Hap," she said breathlessly, "this is Carol. Yeah, I'm a little late, but listen. I'm leaving for the hospital right now. Yeah, everything's all right. We'll see you in a few minutes."

She hung up, turned and passed her hand across her eyes. "Where's that whiskey? I need a shot, bad."

Silence hung heavy in the motel room during the next half hour. Neither of the occupants said much. Carol would raise her glass once in awhile and make little sucking sounds as she sipped the whiskey and water.

The young man sat straight on the sofa, his back not touching the cushion. His rough-hewn face showed no emotion as he waited, but periodically he would check his wrist watch. Finally he spoke.

"Dado should be making his break now," he said in a flat voice.

Carol giggled. "May bad luck follow him all the way," she said and drained the last of her liquor in a nervous gesture. She set the tumbler on the floor. "I'm glad Dado is going to die. I'm glad because Dado deserves to die."

Ray nodded slowly. "Yes, he deserves to die."

"Dado called me dumb, but I wasn't as dumb as he thought I was. I was smart enough to fix him. He wasn't so smart, or he wouldn't have been caught on that Savings and Loan job. They didn't get me, and I had the getaway car right outside the front door. I stayed, even when the shooting started, even when the cops swarmed around the joint."

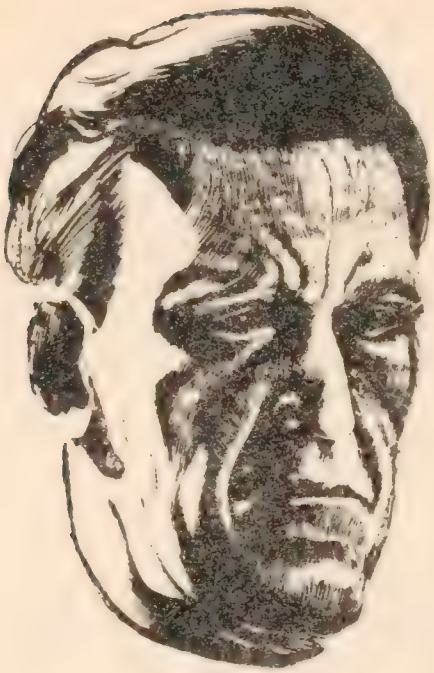
"Dado wasn't smart when he shot the cashier," Ray said.

"Maybe not, but that cashier was dumb too. She should have handed over the cash, not pressed the alarm button. It's kooks like her that cause trouble for people."

Ray looked at his watch. "It's nine thirty-five. It should be finished."

Carol leaned over and clutched Ray's jacket sleeve.

"We know Dado is dead now," she said, her voice a bit thick from the whiskey. "Why can't we get out



of here? I mean, there isn't any sense in hanging around when we know that Dado is dead."

"We will stay here until they make it official." Ray took a transistor radio from his pocket and flipped the switch. A burst of rock music poured from the tiny speaker. He turned the volume down until the music became a whisper. "This station will give us the news as soon as it is released." He placed the radio on the sofa cushion beside him.

Carol brought her knees up under her chin. She clasped her hands around her legs and rocked back and forth to the music. After a few minutes she began to giggle.

"I was thinking," she said. "I mean wouldn't it be a gasser if Dado managed to get down that fire escape alive? Dado would be out there in the middle of a parking lot in his pajamas, with no getaway car." The girl's body shook with suppressed laughter.

Ray shook a cigarette from his pack, he placed one between Carol's lips and touched a match to the tip. He then leaned back and folded his arms across his chest.

Carol smoked the cigarette down in a series of short, deep puffs. Ray took the butt from her and tamped it out in the ash tray. Again the room lapsed into near silence, with only the faint tinkle of music. Suddenly that too stopped.

"This may be it," Ray said as he turned up the volume.

"We have a news flash," the announcer said. "Dado Corone, a suspect being held for the murder of a savings and loan cashier, made an unsuccessful attempt to escape from the prison ward at City hospital only a few moments ago. According to the police report, Corone attempted to shoot his way out, but when the gun misfired, Corone was killed by the police guard. We will now return to our regular musical program."

Ray snapped off the switch and dropped the little radio into his jacket pocket.

Carol picked up the tumbler, and when she found it empty, clutched it in both hands.

"Dado's dead," she said in a small voice. "Dado's really dead."

She repeated the phrase several times, each time her voice grew more shrill.

Ray Downing took the tumbler from her and carried it to the dresser. He measured out the last of the liquor into the glasses, and when he returned he handed one to Carol. Ray held his own drink aloft.

"A toast," he said solemnly. "A toast to Dado's death."

Carol drank down the whisky in one, long gulp, then she jumped up and clutched Ray. "We can go now —I mean we know for sure it is all over, they said so on the radio."

Ray nodded. "I'll fill the car with gas, so we won't have to stop in this territory again. It's not safe for you to be seen; the cops will have a pick-up order for you. Now you stay here."

"Don't be gone long, honey," Carol begged.

Ray pulled himself away and headed for the door. "Don't let anyone in here. I'll give three knocks, a pause and then a final rap when I return."

Carol watched Ray go, her eyes wide with fear.

Ray Downing drove away from the Blue Moon Motel. He passed a filling station on the corner, but pulled in beside a tavern a short distance beyond. He got out of his car and walked inside.

Two men in work clothes sat at the bar, watching a baseball game on the television set. A young couple sat down at the end of the bar, their heads close together. No one looked up as Ray crossed the room and entered the phone booth.

Ray closed the door and pulled out the slip of paper Carol had taken from her purse. He dialed the number, and while he waited, stuffed his hankerchief into the mouthpiece.

"Hap Corone," Ray said in a low voice, "it doesn't matter who this is. Your brother was double-crossed tonight, the powder had been removed from the bullets in his gun. Carol didn't even show up at the hospital. She is now at the Blue Moon Motel, unit eight. Three knocks, a pause and a final rap will get you in."

Ray hung up, stood with his eyes closed for a full moment before he opened the door and strode to the bar.

"Give me a beer," he said to the fat, sad-faced bartender.

The baseball game came to an end and the two workmen began to argue in low voices. The young couple at the end whispered with their heads together. The fat bartender hummed a sad song and Ray Downing sat straight on the stool and made wet rings on the bar with the bottom of his beer bottle.

A siren screamed by on the highway outside and every head turned. The siren snarled into silence close by and one of the workmen walked outside. He looked back in the door. "It's a patrol car. They

stopped down at the Blue Moon Motel. Here comes an ambulance." The man came back and sat down beside his friend.

A short time later a middle-aged man entered. He called for a double shot, even before he reached the bar.

"A girl got killed up at the motel," he announced hoarsely. "I heard the shot." The man downed the drink and wiped his chin. "Some guy shot her in the room, then got away in a car. I heard him drive away."

The girl at the end of the bar looked horrified.

"I hope they catch the guy," she said.

One workman shook his head. "It wouldn't do no good; the courts would turn him loose."

The second workman nodded. "We need more law and order."

The fat bartender nodded. "You never know where they're going to strike next."

Ray stood up. "You'r right. I was to be married next month," he said while he stared straight ahead. "I was to be married to a girl who worked as a cashier in a Savings and Loan company. Last week two hoodlums murdered her during a hold up. One of them shot her down, while the other waited outside in the getaway car."

The girl gave a little strangled cry. "I hope those two hoodlums have to pay for what they did."

"They have," Ray Downing said and crossed to the door. "They have paid," he said and walked out into the night.

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STALEMATE

by

JEFFREY M. WALLMANN

He was quiet, mousy. But inside him was a deadly secret. And he knew the full price he must pay.

MAXIMILLIAN BEAUMONT belied his name. At forty-four, he was a short, stooped, shriveled man, prone to conservative grey suits, sensible shoes, and quiet, bird-like habits. Though he was neither meek nor stupid — holding down the position of office manager for Trident Tobacco Company for over a decade — he knew that he didn't possess the front necessary for the really top positions. He was happy in

his niche; that is, he had been happy. Things, however, had changed drastically since last Tuesday, he reminded himself.

Beaumont's thoughts were interrupted as the door to his tiny office opened. Harold Trident, son of the founder and now president, stood in the doorway.

Beaumont looked up at his employer, a heavy-set man in his sixties, an ex-Navy boxer whose massive shoulders had slumped to his stomach with the years.

"Ready, Beaumont?" Trident asked. After twelve years, Trident still called Beaumont by his last name, the tone and inflection reflecting his subservient position: "I'm about to lock up."

"Just finishing the Kirsch account," Beaumont answered.

Beaumont took a moment to remove his horn-rimmed bifocals and rub his eyes wearily before gathering the papers together and placing the Kirsch folder in his desk. He stood up, brushed imaginary crumbs off his vest, picked up his black leather briefcase and walked out.

The door to Trident's office was ajar, and as Beaumont passed, Trident called out, "Good night."

Beaumont stopped and looked in. "Good night, sir."

"You're not planning to take Kirsch home, I trust."

"What?"

"Your briefcase, Beaumont. You're not carrying work home, are you?"

Beaumont smiled. "Oh, no, sir. No work for me tonight."

"Well, then go get a drink some place, Beaumont. It'll do you good. Might loosen you up."

"Yes, sir." Beaumont backed away. "I might do just that."

Beaumont couldn't help but feel amused as he crossed the worn linoleum and stepped out the front door. Trident couldn't have said anything better, he thought. He walked briskly across the fence-enclosed parking lot toward his three-year-old Dodge. He paused at the door, smelling the warm tang of the Louisville night; then he slipped inside and started his car.

Trident Tobacco was on Charles and Conway Streets. It consisted of one huge building with a vaulted ceiling and a smaller single story addition on the right end for the offices.

The larger building was the warehouse, where tobacco Trident bought from small farmers hung in readiness for the auctions.

Beaumont turned left on Charles and made his way downtown to *The Maverick,* a small cocktail lounge catering to the white collar workers of Louisville. Trident had suggested a drink, Beaumont thought wryly. Trident was going to be in for a surprise.

Beaumont saw an empty table next to the low wall of old brick which bisected the bar from the booth and table section. He pushed his way through the men crowded

around the polished oak bar, feeling slightly jealous at not being six foot one and able to brag with other virile giants over this willing girl or that big deal.

He seated himself and ordered mash-and-branch when the bored hostess came by. He leaned back, putting his arm on the brick wall, feeling the plastic flowers that had been thickly planted in plastic moss along its top. The flowers were dusty.

The bourbon was caustic to Beaumont. He took two small sips and then poured the drink into the trough of flowers, making sure he was unnoticed. He ordered another when the hostess passed and didn't bother to taste it. Instead he irrigated the flowers with it immediately. After the fourth round Beaumont checked his watch. Nearly seven o'clock.

It was time to return. He made his way out of *The Maverick* as inconspicuously as he could and drove back to Trident Tobacco, cruising past once to make sure his employer had left. The lights were out. Beaumont unlocked the parking lot gate, taking the time to close it after him as he drove in, and parked beside the office in the dark shadows of an overhang. He picked up the briefcase and stepped out.

He checked his watch again when he had closed the office door behind him.

At seven-thirty the first night patrol would come by; there wasn't much time. Beaumont went directly to the Mosler safe, an old relic which rested between Trident's office and the accountant's desk. He placed his case on the floor and opened it, taking out a flashlight. He propped the flashlight on the accountant's desk so he could see what he was doing. Then he looked down at the tools of a trade he had long ago given up — or so he thought.

Beaumont smiled and paused only long enough to put on the thin, English kid driving gloves. He slipped them on slowly, stretching each finger until the gloves were a second skin. He was thankful the contours of his hands hadn't changed in all the years.

He set to work on the safe's dial. He knew the combination, had known it for ten of the past twelve years, so the safe was the easiest crack he had ever made. He pulled the lever down, hearing the inner bolts slide back, and swung the heavy steel door open.

Beaumont removed the petty cash box from the narrow top shelf of the safe and took out twenty dollars and some change. He left the box conspicuously on the floor, and ignoring the papers on the top shelf, went to work on the larger bottom shelf.

One half of the lower shelf was a built-in compartment, a safe within a safe. Only Trident knew its combination, but that didn't bother Beaumont. He reached into his case and took out a thick roll of cotton

wadding, which he unwound to expose a small crowbar. He put the wadding aside and fitted the sharpened prong of the bar under the inner safe's dial. He pressed against it. The dial protested, then popped off with the shaft attached. He put the bar down and reached into the shaft's hole and released the broken catch with his forefinger.

Beaumont stared at fifty thousand dollars.

Outside of banks, only a few companies keep that much cash around. Trident Tobacco had to by nature of their business. The farmers it dealt with raised tobacco, usually as an incidental crop, and payment by check or first-of-the-month was not considered acceptable to them. The farmer would bring in his leaves after home curing them for a few months. After they had been graded by color and quality and tied into hands — bunches of twenty to thirty leaves — they expected to be paid. In cash.

Trident had foolishly considered that he had enough protection. After all, his father had never been robbed and neither had he, not in all these years. And besides, he had insurance, didn't he? Beaumont withdrew a handful of bills. The thought occurred to him that Trident was going to have the chance to find out just how good his insurance was.

Beaumont had to remove some of the other items in his case to make room for the currency, but they were to be used later anyway. When he was finished stripping the compartment, he shut the inner door and then closed and locked the outer door. The safe looked as though it had never been touched. It wouldn't for long.

Beaumont spread apart another wad of cotton. He picked up a glob of plastic explosive and slapped it on the safe between the dial and lever. It stuck to the metal like chewing gum. Beaumont hadn't used the explosive for over a decade, but there was no reason it wouldn't be active. There was enough to blow the door completely off.

Next Beaumont picked up a small cylinder about the size of a cigar tube and wedged it into the explosive so that it would stand upright. Trailing from a hole in the tube's bottom was a short string of guncotton, which Beaumont also pressed into the explosive. Then he poured a small bottle of nitric acid into the open top of the tube.

The acid began to eat away at a zinc plate Beaumont had carefully fitted halfway down the tube. In four hours the zinc would be dissolved, the acid would ignite the guncotton, and the guncotton would trigger the explosive.

Beaumont reached into his jacket pocket and took out a small cellophane bag. Inside was one carefully preserved cigarette butt. He placed it on the floor far enough away from the safe so that the explosion would not bother it, and then mash-

ed it gently into the floor with his foot. It was still a perfect specimen.

The bottle, wadding, and flashlight were placed on top of the money; then Beaumont peeled off the gloves and added them, latching the case afterwards. He took a moment to check, and satisfied that nothing had been left which was not intentional, he walked out of the office. He shut the front door firmly, then jimmied it back open with the crowbar and reclosed it. The wood was not so badly splintered as to catch the casual eye of the patrol, but later when the investigation was made it would be obvious.

Beaumont put the bar in the case and the case beside him on the front seat of his car after locking it. He drove straight to the bus terminal in downtown Louisville. As he did he couldn't help feeling the pride of a job well done. True, years of disuse had slowed him, but the operation had taken slightly more than ten minutes, which wasn't bad at all, considering.

He took another five minutes to take a locker at the terminal and mail both the briefcase key and the locker key to himself. He had the envelope ready and stamped, addressed in care of General Delivery, Louisville main post office.

He returned to *The* [illegible]*k*. He was surprised to find the same table he had occupied earlier vacant, and the hostess hadn't seemed

to notice his absence. He picked up where he had left off, ordering another bourbon and water; but this time he drank the liquor. He tried not to gag, his stomach protesting the unfamiliar burning. He gauged his drinks, and soon was mildly drunk. He hated the feeling, the loss of reason and control, but it was necessary.

He kept the same level of intoxication until ten forty-five, when he proceeded to trip the first man who passed his table. The man sprawled. Beaumont laughed hysterically and swore at him, and when the stranger objected, Beaumont hit him. He slugged a waiter who came to calm things down, and when the police arrived, he tried to bite the sergeant on the ankle.

The police hauled him off screaming, his hands behind him in handcuffs. He was booked for aggravated assault, drunk and disorderly in a public place, public nuisance, destroying private property, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, abusive language, and disturbing the peace. He slept it off in a cell.

At mid-morning he was allowed his one phone call, and an hour later he faced his employer across the visitor's table, shaky, stubble-chinned, and hung over. Beaumont couldn't help but notice that Trident looked almost as bad, as though he had been up all night.

"I'm sorry sir," he said recalcitrantly.

"What the devil happened, Beaumont? I understand you went completely wild last night."

"I — had that drink. The one you suggested, remember?"

"I know, man, but — "

"I hardly ever drink, sir," Beaumont continued in a shaky voice. "I don't know what got into me." He paused. "I'll understand if you don't want me — "

"Fire you? Don't be silly, Beaumont. Every man makes a fool of himself sometime in his life. In fact, you can be thankful you were arrested."

Beaumont frowned. "What do you mean?"

"At eleven o'clock last night, some damned thief robbed us of the tobacco money."

"Good Lord!" Beaumont exclaimed. "Do they know who did it?"

"No. He got away clean as can be." Trident looked slightly apologetic. "I must admit, there was a moment there when I thought it was you."

"Me?"

"I tried to call you after I was notified, and you weren't at home. And then this morning when you didn't show up — "

Beaumont nodded. "I understand sir." He smiled weakly at Trident.

"I've arranged your bail, Beaumont. You'll be out of here shortly. I'll take you home."

"But my work," Beaumont protested. "The office — "

"I've had to close down for the

day. Besides, you need a hot bath and a good rest. Don't worry, Beaumont. There will be plenty to do tomorrow, what with the insurance and everything."

On the way to Beaumont's apartment, Trident explained the details of the robbery. "The police theorize the thief came over the fence, jimmied the door and blew the safe with some kind of explosive. He took everything, even the petty cash, right under the noses of those damned fool patrolmen." Trident smiled at Beaumont grimly. "The police seem to think they have a clue, though."

"Really?"

"A cigarette butt they found near the safe. They figure the thief was smoking and forgot where he was. Put it out automatically. I don't really see what good it will do them."

Beaumont stared out the window. "Oh, you never can tell."

Beaumont thanked Trident when they arrived at his apartment house, and he walked up to his third floor flat. He ran his bath water while he ate, then soaked for almost an hour and dressed casually. He was tired but dismissed the idea of a nap.

Harry Kruber arrived at three-fifteen.

"Mix me a drink," he snapped when Beaumont let him in. "We've got business to discuss."

Beaumont did, placing the glass in front of Kruber as the man sat in an overstuffed chair. Kruber wiped his hands on his work shirt and picked up the glass. His teeth were brown and dirty, and like Trident he had a large, thick-set build.

"Cheers," he said and took a noisy swallow.

Beaumont sat across from Kruber, folding his hands in his lap and crossing his legs. He looked slightly like a drawing-room Englishman.

"I'm sorry about last night, Harry," he said.

"I bet you are," Kruber retorted. "You think I'm stupid, Max? While I'm out sitting in my car on some God-forsaken dirt road, Trident gets robbed. It was your idea to meet me out there in the middle of the night, and I can sure figure who was behind the burglary, too."

"Me? I was in jail when it happened. I was drunk, you see."

Kruber eyed Beaumont over the rim of the glass. "I don't believe you. You don't drink. Never have."

"It's true. Check with the police if you want. Or here—" Beaumont pulled a laundry ticket-sized paper out of his pocket and handed it to Kruber. "Here's my property receipt from when I was booked by the police."

"I'll be damned. Well, my price is still one thousand a month. It ought to be more, considering last night." Kruber smiled as he handed the receipt back. "After all, it would go twice as bad now if Trident found out you were once a burglar by trade. The twelve years you've

gone straight wouldn't mean a thing."

"You always were rotten, Harry, even when we were kids in Cincinnati."

"Yeah, but I've stayed clean. I've never even had my fingerprints taken."

"So you said last week."

"When I first read about the robbery, I figured you did it to pay me off, but I see I was wrong. No matter, you'll cough up anyway. And if you think I won't talk, Max, think again. I have nothing to lose."

"But you do, Harry," Beaumont said quietly. "About ten years. You see, the police found a cigarette butt the thief left behind, and in case you don't know, the heat from the tobacco and the oils from the skin make an excellent fingerprint on the porous paper."

"That's his worry, not mine."

"It is yours, Harry. You hold your cigarette by your forefinger and thumb. I noticed that when you visited me last week. I carefully kept the butt after you left, and I'm afraid that was the cigarette the police found at Trident last night. Please don't ask me how it got there. I'm not about to tell."

Beaumont cupped his hands as if in prayer. "As long as you're not suspected, there won't be any reason to take your prints for a match. But if somebody should say something and they should check up on you, well — " Beaumont shrugged.

"But I wasn't there! I was — " Kruber stopped in mid-sentence.

"That's right, Harry. You don't have an alibi." Beaumont stood up. "It's been nice seeing you again. And do be careful. It would be too bad if you were picked up for any reason, wouldn't it?"

"You figure you've won, don't you, Beaumont?" Kruber snarled. "You took that money, though I don't just know how the hell you did it."

Beaumont smiled slightly. "Don't worry about the money. It might just turn up one of these days. It could be that the burglar took it as more of a lesson than for personal gain. As for winning? Well, I must admit I won't be paying you blackmail, and that's something."

Beaumont paused, searching for the proper phrase. "No, I haven't won, but then I haven't lost, either. Call it a stalemate, Harry, a perfect stalemate."

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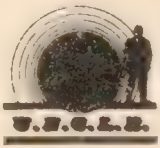

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December -1970

brush with death

by

EDWARD WELLEN

He was a dead man, betrayed by his best friend. But he still had one last answer.

THE DOOR WAS half open and I walked in without knocking. Hugh Demuth, his eyes half closed, was at his easel, daubing away. He didn't notice me until my shadow fell across his painting.

He turned with an inquiring smile. The smile broadened. Stewart Mahl! Where've you been all these years?"

I didn't answer. I was staring at the canvas on the easel. It looked like a cut of butcher's apron. I gazed around frowning at the crazy daubs hanging on the walls and leaning in corners. "What gives?"

He seemed puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The experts called you the best draftsman since da Vinci. Don't tell me you've lost your touch."

He brushed that aside, daubing the air impatiently. "If you want to copy nature, use a camera. I close my eyes on outer reality to contemplate inner reality."

"Does it pay?"

He smiled. "Truth is all that matters."

Many many shekels of sun danced on the wall but on the sink a bone of soap, a gap-tooth comb, and a half used tube of toothpaste formed a still life truer to reality.

He looked at me fondly. "What have you been doing, Stew?"

"One thing," I said eyeing the paintings, "I've left fingerpainting to the chimps." He grinned, but I could tell he felt hurt. I grinned back to show I had been only kidding. I hadn't been; this abstract nonsense of his had come as a shock when I had been counting on his ability to render reality.

"Kidding aside," I said, "I'm in advertising. Matter of fact that's why I tracked you down. I handle a safe manufacturer and I need a painting of a safe. It's got to look so real you'd scrape your knuckles if you punched it."

"Why not a photo?"

"This has to be realer than a photo."

He smiled.

I said with a touch of impatience, "Could you do it?"

"Oh, I could do it," he said quietly. "But" — his eyes canvassed the falls — "I have my own work to do."

My eyes fell on a large painting that had a wet look. Blobs of nothing. He followed my gaze. He smiled but his eyes grew bright. "That's my masterpiece. When I finish it."

I stared at him and shook my head.

He grinned. "What I'm trying to do, experimenting with lights and pigments, is — well, imagine Goya painted his Countess both nude and clothed in the same space on the same canvas. That's what I'm trying to do."

"That's like trying to read between a line." I stared at him and shook my head again. "It may be art. It may be great art. But it ain't commercial."

His mouth twisted in a smile. "Until after I'm dead. Then it'll likely sell for ten grand."

I grinned. "Then I'll do you a favor and bump you off."

He laughed.

I glanced about. A fly lit on the amber sill. I said with more than a touch of impatience, "Look, can you use real money now?"

He hesitated, then grinned ruefully.

"My bankroll's at the vanishing point."

"Then, in the name of common sense, do the job."

He laughed. We shook hands.

I handed him a safe catalog, pointed out the safe in question, and gave him the dimensions, a fraction less than life size.

He nailed a huge canvas to a stretcher and set it on an easel. He squeezed blobs of paint from tubes on the palette. He clipped a

small aluminum cup to the palette and half-filled it with oil and turpentine.

I watched a while, then left.

I spent much of the time in bars, gazing through glasses that foreshortened time and space. And then one afternoon I brought Bart Peters to Demuth's studio.

"What do you think, Bart?"

He narrowed his flecked eyes at the painting. The painted safe seemed real enough to me. He moved first to one side and then to the other. At last he nodded.

I sighed in relief.

Hugh stared at Bart, who I have to admit was not as pretty as a picture, then eyed me closely. "Now look, Stew — "

I said, "Don't start guessing. Just finish it up and get paid and forget it."

He set his brush down. "I want to know what I've let myself in for."

"About twenty years."

He stared.

I shrugged. "You wanted to know? Look, at night the real safe's in a blaze of light in full view of passers-by in the street. We hang this painting in front of the safe and work behind it, opening the safe."

He moved as if to smear his hand across the wet paint.

I grabbed his arm. "You can't back out now. It only needs a few more strokes."

"Get yourself another boy."

"No time. The safe is loaded now. The armored truck is coming in a few days. There won't be such pickings for years."

"That poses a problem for you, doesn't it."

I tightened my grip on his arm. "Not for me. For you. You're in this all the way now. I'm not letting this chance go blooie."

He eyed me levelly. "How do you mean to unblooie it?"

"You cross me and so help me I'll not only bump you off but I'll ruin every one of your canvasses." I felt him stiffen. I softened my tone. "Stick with me and you'll draw part of the take. That's how it is."

He stood still.

"Just to show you I mean business." I motioned to Peters. He put himself between Hugh Demuth and the painting of the safe. I let go of Demuth. I whipped out my penknife and slashed his masterpiece.

His eyes filmed over. The palette slipped from his fingers and plopped on the floor. There was a sticky sound as it tried to bounce.

His eyes unfilmed and he stared at me. "Studying your face, old friend, I believe the story about 'The Last Supper.' "

I smiled. "Tell us."

"Da Vinci searched the country around Milan for men to pose as Jesus and the disciples. He found a young peasant with the kind and serene expression he wanted for his Jesus. But it wasn't till years later that he found the face he wanted for his Judas. It was the

same peasant. He had become a criminal in the meanwhile and his face had come to show a cruel and troubled expression." He smiled sadly, then gazed at the fallen palette. "I'll have to set up the palette with fresh colors."

He picked up a knife. I backed a step before I saw it was only a palette knife. He smiled and scraped the palette.

Bart Peters and I took turns watching. The painting seemed finished to me yet he was still giving it touches when I couldn't see what good they were doing.

"Quit stalling.," I said.

"I'm a perfectionist," he said. "I'm not stalling. You don't have an artist's eye, that's what's wrong with you."

"It better be finished and dry by day after tomorrow, that's what."

It was. I was carrying it rolled up on home projection screen fittings and Hugh Demuth and I were leaving his studio.

He stopped suddenly and said, "Wait."

I eyed him sharply. "We're moving on split-second timing, you know."

"I know. But this is a detail that might be important."

"Go on."

"How bright is the light over the safe?"

"Two hundred watts. Why?"

"Light falls away in brightness with distance. To make the painted safe seem to be back where the

real safe is, the light that hits it should be dimmer."

"Damn. I should've thought of that."

Demuth smiled. "It so happens I have a hundred-fifty watt bulb."

"Then don't just stand there."

He ran to his closet and came back with the bulb.

I slapped his back. "Now you're with it, Hugh."

"I told you I'm a perfectionist."

We walked down Stone Street under the black sky. A car with M.D. plates pulled up at the corner of Stone and New. Peters got out carrying a doctor's bag. He moved toward the office.

By the time Demuth and I reached the glass door Peters had cut the hole, following the outer rim of the gilt "O" in "CO." The

hole was large enough for him to put his hand through to shut off the alarm and then to unlatch the door from within.

We went in. Peters closed the door and fixed the oval back in place with scotch tape. While he was doing that Demuth and I set up the painting three feet in front of the real safe.

I compared the real and the phony. I would've put my money on the phony. But I saw Demuth was right, the painting reflected too much light.

Peters glanced at it in passing and nodded. He knelt down behind it and eyed the real safe eagerly. I crouched beside him. Demuth held up his bulb.

"Make it fast," I said.

Peters looked around frowning. "What's this?"

"This is the finishing touch," I said.

Peters said nothing but it was plain he didn't like it.

Hugh Demuth unscrewed the burning bulb. The gloves we wore were sleazy but if he burned his fingers he kept it to himself. I saw him black against the light from the street. He seemed to hesitate.

I drew my gun. I said, "Your silhouette's a fine target."

He laughed and screwed in the other bulb. The light seemed much softer.

Bart Peters had taken out a stethoscope and eared it. He put the tip to the lock and began turning the dial.

Demuth came back of the canvas and crouched beside me. I saw his teeth gleam, then his bony profile as he watched Peters.

At last the safe swung open. Peters and I began stuffing bills into the doctor's bag. Peters clamped a warning hand on my arm. I listened.

I heard the cop on the beat strolling down the street, trying doors. He came nearer. He paused. The doorknob started to rattle, stopped.

His whistle blew.

I flattened and so did Peters.

I shot the light out.

I heard Hugh Demuth laugh shakily.

Glass shattered and a branding iron seared my shoulder. My other hand groped for my dropped gun and closed on a sheaf of bills. I riffled the bills near my ear and felt a cold wind, like the sense of loss.

A prowl car's spot poured light through holes in the canvas and I saw Peters. He lay tumbled still.

"How did the cop know?" I asked myself aloud. "How did he know?"

I heard a chilling sound and looked.

Hugh Demuth was laughing blood. "Special bulb. Under that light . . . pigment . . . painting of open safe."

There's Always A Flaw

by MATTHEW MINER

Wisely and well had he set his course. All it took was brains —and a little bit of murder . . .

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT BRECK hated the rain. It was torrential as he ran for the warehouse, obliterating much of the surrounding Harbor Island in a dirty grey sheen.

He side-stepped a puddle and hit another one inadvertently, cursed the Port Authority for making him park so far from Pier 2, and wondered again why he had ever decided on Seattle as a place to live.

When it wasn't raining, it looked as though it was going to any minute, but at least it was better than the snows of his native Idaho. The dark sky, as if hearing his thoughts, protested by opening a sluice of water upon him.

Breck ducked under the overhang of the long warehouse which paralleled the pier, walked down to the freighter, and then dashed for the gangplank.

The gangplank was wooden with

narrow raised slats nailed across to prevent slippage. The slats were positioned so that they were too close together for his long stride, but too far apart to be taken two at a time, and the rope guideline was covered with slick plastic tubing.

Breck wondered if the rest of the *M. S. Reisensten* was designed as adversely, for though he was as German as the ship, he had long ago become wary of his race's image of efficiency and functionality.

As Breck reached the after-deck, the companionway door opened and a short, plump grey-haired man in a white steward's jacket put his head out and motioned to him.

"Are you *Herr* Breck? Yes, good. Come with me." The steward had a heavily accented voice, gruff but friendly. He held the door for Breck and shut it after him. "I am Chief Steward Franz Weber. The captain is waiting."

"Thank you." Breck wiped the water from his mackinaw as he followed the steward up to the bridge. He braced himself as the storm buffeted the ship, pleased to find that the *M.S. Reisenstein* was a better ship than he had first supposed. He knew from the ship's agents, whom he had called earlier that morning, that she was one of 56 similiar freighters owned by North Rossen Lines, Bremen, and that she could carry seven passengers and 5800 tons of cargo at seventeen knots, which was a little slow these days for a 500 foot, 7900 ton vessel.

Nevertheless, the *Reisenstein* was relatively new and cleaner than most others he'd seen, and while it could have been his imagination, it seemed to him that Weber walked with pride.

Breck was struck by the strong resemblance of Captain Deiter to himself. They both had the same hawk nose and overlarge eyes and gaunt face attached somewhat precariously to a thin-framed body. The captain was smaller and older and wore his hair in Nordic fashion —long, combed back with the ends sticking up like quills on a porcupine—but he stood with stooped shoulders and his hands clasped behind his back as Breck often did in his own office.

"Guten morgen," Captain Deiter said with a nod. *"Herr* Breck?"

"Yes. Good morning."

"The Port Authority requested a delay in disembarcation until you arrived. Is it a matter of customs, perhaps?"

"No," Breck replied. "I must talk to one of your passengers, Mr. Grant Reskin, concerning the death of his aunt three days ago."

"Ah. We were at sea, then, between Los Angeles and Oakland. *Herr* Reskin does not know? Such a shame. You should have sent a cable."

"We had our reason, Captain. I assure you, this was the best way."

"But if you did not mind that

delay, surely you could have waited until he was ashore. Or at least let the other passengers off. I do not understand."

"We didn't wish to alarm him. He might not have been so easy to locate once he was on land, and if the others were allowed to go, he could have become suspicious. The element of surprise would have been lost."

"You act as though he has done something wrong. *Nein!* He has been with us since Le Havre, and has been an excellent passenger."

Breck smiled wryly.

"Merely routine," he said. "But if it becomes necessary, do I have your permission to remove him from your ship?"

"Forcibly? *Ach*, I could not allow that, *Herr* Breck. This is a German ship, and if I should—"

"Excuse me, Captain," Breck interrupted. He flipped open a small note pad and thumbed through it to a particular page. "Last August the *Reisenstein* was in Seattle, and you were looking for three of your crew an hour before sailing. We found them and returned them. Without charges, I might add."

"Permission granted," Deiter said hastily. "International cooperation is something I have strongly believed in. Franz, show *Herr* Breck to *Herr* Reskin's *kabine*.

On the way back down, steward Weber supplied more information. "*Herr* Reskin is in *kabine* 1, our only single. We have two others, but they are doubles."

"Filled?"

"Yes. Two couples, one from Antwerp and the other from Le Havre, where your Herr Reskin boarded. They went ashore in Los Angeles, our first port, and now all we have is a retired gentleman from Oakland who is going to Vancouver, Canada."

"And Mr. Reskin was with you the whole time?"

"Yes. He is quiet and well mannered, although perhaps a little fussy. He does not like to socialize with the passengers or crew." Weber shrugged. "Always working, that man, staying in his *kabine* with his numbers." The steward chuckled slightly. "Especially during the storm."

"Storm? You mean this storm?"

Weber nodded. "We have had bad weather all the way up the coast. *Herr* Reskin was seasick during the worst of it."

Breck stopped Weber with a hand upon his sleeve. "When was that?"

"Between Los Angeles and Oakland. He was in his *kabine* for the whole day of the trip, working when he could, and I brought him tea and toast. I remember. Always it was tea and toast."

"Los Angeles was the first port after you left Europe. Did Mr. Reskin go on shore there?"

Weber turned and continued his way. "Of course. We had all been

at sea for a month and everybody wished to get off. But *Herr* Reskin was only gone for an hour at the most, I'd say, and about the same in Oakland. I saw him much of the time on the pier, watching the men work."

"That's all? Are you sure?"

"It is my job, *Herr* Breck! It is not so easy to misplace one passenger out of few. yes?"

They passed the combination smoking lounge and dining room and came to a mahogany door which faced the outside and was about amidship.

"Ah, here we are," Weber said. He knocked on the door. *"Herr* Reskin?"

There was a scrape of a chair and then the door opened and a medium built man with long brown hair and sad eyes stood smiling. "Yes, Franz. Are we finally leaving? Good. I've been packed for hours."

Weber shook his head. *"Nein,* but this gentleman wishes to talk to you, if you don't mind."

Reskin turned to Breck. "Yes?"

Breck had seen a picture of Reskin and knew that he was thirty-five years old, but he was struck by how much older he seemed in life, and the ivory pallor he had which Breck usually associated with skid-row derelicts and their "bar tan."

Breck doubted that Reskin drank that much, though. Reskin wore a deep blue sports shirt open at the throat and which looked to be of expensive silk, and well tailored blue denims with flare bottoms which matched his canvas shoes.

But there was another kind of recognition which took place at that moment. Not that they had ever met before, or even knew of the other's existance; rather it was the simultaneous realization of the hunter of his quarry and the hunted of his stalker. Neither Breck nor Reskin gave any sign of cognition. Reskin did not lick dry lips or tremble nervously, but Breck could see it in the eyes. He prided himself in that he always could.

"I'm Detective-Sergeant Breck, Seattle Police. May I come in?" The question was rhetoric, for as he was speaking he was moving through the doorway.

Reskin motioned to a chair.

"Have a seat, Sergeant Breck." Then he turned to the steward, saying, "Franz, can we have some coffee?"

"Yes, yes of course." Weber closed the door hurriedly as he left the cabin.

"Now, then," began Reskin, "I, ah—"

"I have bad news," Breck said, sitting in the proffered chair. "I'm afraid that your Aunt Leona has died."

"No!" Reskin's head shook as though he had been hit on the jaw and he blinked rapidly a few times. He passed a hand through his dark brown hair and patted the back of

his neck. "She was so old . . . " He sighed. "I guess it was about time."

He sat down heavily on the sofa-berth across the table from Breck, his eyes looking like a dachshund's. "How did it happen?"

Breck reached in his inner jacket pocket and produced a billiard pipe and a pouch of tobacco. He did not answer Reskin at once, but packed the pipe carefully.

"A fall," he said at last. "down a flight of stairs in her home. She suffered a broken back."

"How terrible," Reskin intoned. "I told her to be careful." He swallowed spasmodically and his voice quivered slightly. "I told her, but she wouldn't listen. She never listened to anybody."

"Mmmm," said Breck, lighting his pipe. He watched Reskin intently.

Reskin took a deep breath in order to gain control. "Thank you, Sergeant. This is an awful blow, but she was old and, well accidents will happen."

"There was one other thing, Mr. Reskin," Breck said as he waved out the match.

"Yes?"

"She didn't die at once."

Reskin opened his mouth as if to say something, then checked himself. The reaction was not overlooked by Breck, nor the other, smaller ones such as the narrowing of the pupils and the slight raise of the veins along the wrist.

"Yes," Breck continued, "she died on the way to the hospital. The housekeeper found her in the morning and called an ambulance, but it was too late, I'm afraid."

There was a knock, and Weber entered bearing a tray of coffee. He placed the cups and pots beside the men and departed without a word. Breck poured himself a cup as though nothing had happened and he had not caught Reskin's reaction.

"Terrible, simply terrible," Reskin repeated, his momentary lapse of composure regained. "I trust she was unconcious. The pain must have been excruciating."

"She was."

"Thank God," Reskin sighed. He poured his coffee and started to lift his cup.

"Most of the time," Breck suddenly added. Reskin's hand jerked slightly. Breck pressed on. "She was able to whisper some rather strange things to the housekeeper just before she died. Perhaps you can help us with them."

"If I can."

"She said that she had been pushed."

"What?" Reskin's cup crashed into the saucer.

"Pushed, not slipped—by you."

"That's absurd!" Reskin shivered as though caught in a sudden draft. "The housekeeper must be lying! She never did like me"

"Perhaps. Perhaps your aunt was pushed down the stairs and was calling for you and the housekeeper mixed up the words."

"I don't believe anybody pushed my aunt. She didn't have many friends, but the ones she had all loved her. No, it must have been an accident."

"Burglars, then," Breck persisted. "Her husband left her rich when he died, I believe. She discovered them in the house. A frail old lady . . . a steep set of stairs . . . a simple and uncomplicated way. A way, which, under normal circumstances, would have been taken as an accident with no questions asked."

Breck sucked on his pipe, then said, "In a hurry. Too bad. The faint pulse was passed over, and she was thought to be dead. I wonder why?"

"The burglars were afraid, I would imagine, and wanted to get away as soon as possible." Reskin nodded. "Yes, she had lots of jewelry and such around her house. I wouldn't doubt it was robbery."

"Except that there was nothing taken and no forcible entry."

"Oh."

Breck's pipe had gone out. He took his time relighting it, settling in the chair as he did.

"Tell me," he said, "Do you know of any other living relatives of hers that we should notify?"

"No. I am the only one."

"Then that makes you the sole heir, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Reskin poured himself the last of his coffee.

"To a substantial estate," added Breck.

Reskin smiled thinly. "Aunt Leona has a large portfolio of stocks. I have handled them for years. You see, I am a self employed investment counsellor, and—"

"I know," Breck broke in. "I also know you are in debt."

"That's true. I have made some bad investments lately, but how did you know?"

"You have been accused, whether falsely, deliriously, or otherwise. Please understand, Mr. Reskin, that we must investigate. Now, anything which you may add can help us clear up the picture."

Breck tapped the dottle into the ashtray with short, powerful strokes and placed the pipe back in his pocket. "Considering your debts, wasn't this a rather inopportune time to take a boat cruise?"

"Since you know my finances, you must also know that I've taken freighters back and forth to Europe for years. I dislike planes, with their cramped seats and plastic food. I find the crossing envigorating, relaxing, and I get a hell of a lot of work done."

"Europe. Nice place. You've got quite a reputation in spots over there, don't you?"

"I don't follow."

"Majorca, Paris, the Riviera. Playboys, starlets, royalty—the so-called Jet-Set life."

"Business contacts," Reskin said tersely.

Breck made a noncommital noise in his throat. "Did you enjoy Los Angeles?"

"I never have. I stretched my legs for a bit on shore. That's all."

"And San Francisco?"

"We docked in Oakland, Sergeant. And yes, the same."

"Make a phone call? Buy a sandwich? See anybody?"

"Nothing. I wasn't feeling well."

"Seasick?"

"Very."

"Don't you think it odd that a man as used to the sea as you would suddenly get sick after so long a time? Especially during the time when his aunt was dying?"

"Coincidence."

"What did you have to eat while you were so sick, Mr. Reskin?"

"Now wait a minute. My aunt had an accident, and there is no proof to the contrary. If she did say that I had pushed her down the stairs, which I doubt to begin with, then that proves she was raving. I was right here when it happened, and you know it. I didn't reach home until this morning, and then you prevented me from leaving. Stop fishing, Sergeant Breck, and let me leave the ship."

"Please answer the question," Breck replied evenly.

Reskin leaned forward on his arms. "Tea and toast. All right?" He smiled coldly. "You think I did it, don't you? You really think I somehow managed to be in two places at the same time. I resent your suspicions.

"I'm doing my job," Breck said blandly. "I have to look at all the possibilities, no matter how implausible, and try and figure out the how and why. In this case, the why is clear—the inheritance— but the how is a little harder. It can be done, though."

"Oh?"

"Just hypothetical, of course."

"Of course. Keep going, Sergeant. I'm interested."

"If I were a man in financial difficulties, a man like yourself, and I wished to kill my aunt for her money, I would find a person who

looked similar to me in build and general characteristics. Perhaps an actor friend in Europe, who could use makeup and a wig. I would have him change places with me in Los Angeles, and while I flew to Seattle, he would go on board and play sick in my darkened cabin.

"Perhaps, because of his rich stomach, he would actually be sick, but that doesn't matter. When the ship would have reached Oakland, I would have been back from killing my aunt and would change places with him again. Even if the killing was shown not to be accidental, I would still have an alibi. Clever, but not clever enough."

"Absurd! Absolutely preposterous!"

"Perhaps." Beck saw the look in Reskin's eyes and knew he had guessed right. "Perhaps not. We are checking the airlines, cabs hotels, and aquaintances. If there was a substitute, we'll find out."

"But I tell you I was right here!" Reskin jumped up and crossed to a breifcase stacked with the other suitcases near the bunk. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the case, then took out a ledger and handed it to Breck.

"Open it," he said. "You will find that this is the account of one of my clients, and you can see by the entries that I was working on them on the day in question. They are all in order, something which I couldn't have done overnight, and they are in my handwriting. Franz saw me working on them in this cabin on the day Aunt Leona died."

Breck studied the meticulous records. The thin pencil figures were carefully recorded in small rows across the pale green sheets, and Breck knew that if they were produced in court and identified by a handwriting expert and Weber as being genuine, it would clinch Reskin's alibi. He felt the sinking sensation of defeat, and yet he knew there was something wrong, something so small, yet so important . . .

And then he saw the flaw. He had him. Cold.

The records, so carefully and perfectly done, would have been impossible to do by a man, sick or well, on a rolling boat in the middle of a raging storm. The pages should have been full of scrawls, smudges, and erasures. Breck had his proof that Reskin was in a calmer location when he had done them, such as an airliner or hotel room, and the pages Weber had seen must have been plants.

Breck did not change expression, but inwardly he smiled. Reskin was guilty, just as he had suspected from the beginning, and once downtown and in front of witnesses, Breck had a feeling it woudn't take long for Reskin to confess, not once he was shown his mistake. And there always is one, Breck thought. There's always a flaw.

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